Let's revisit water management district fees; concentrate on water quality issues | Opinion

Mike Linton, Clerk-County Commissioner  Published 8:30 a.m. ET, April 17, 2020 | Updated 3:02 p.m. ET, April 18, 2020

If Palm Beach County and our neighbors and friends to the north in Broward County believe in our environmental success stories, they must understand what the Fraser River Lagoon and the St. Lucie River are worth. And so do I.

We have been working to improve our water because we love the ocean, the beaches, the Indian River Lagoon and all the opportunities those natural resources provide us. Our citizens voted in favor of the Water and Land Legacy Amendment (WLLA), the environment-friendly third-growth Lanes Program and the Broward County Safe Our Lagoons Stacks Tax Initiative (SOLS) (2015).

A recent poll by FAU confirmed that statewide support for natural resources is increasing throughout the state and across political party lines.

Palm Beach County residents are very committed to the preservation of our water quality and government at all levels needs to do more to address the problems. And most residents say they are willing to pay slightly more to sustain the water quality they enjoy living here.

Many: Algae's toxic blooms in dirty lagoons, ever less when not flowing

How do we Observe, or go in regards to the Indian River Lagoon?

The Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition, together with the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County, commissioned Florida Atlantic University (FAU) to conduct a statewide poll of voters on the quality of Florida's waterways. More than 61% of respondents agree or strongly agree that state and local governments need to do more to protect water quality in lakes, rivers, springs and estuaries. Improvving 62% of Floridians are willing to pay $1.92 per month to help pay for projects to clean up our waterways, according to FAU.

Florida's tourism budget is facing challenges due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 virus. However, water quality remain a key issue for the state's future residents and visitors. In order to address water quality issues across the state, the Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition and the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County are an annual conference on the benefits of water management district fees. Both coalitions propose a model case increase of 1%, from $1.92 per month to $2.93 per month for a median-priced home. However, many residents still believe in the environmental work and their taxes have been raised and are not represented in the water management district fees. A recent study indicates that Florida's water management district fees are not enough to cover the costs of maintaining the waterways.

The fee proposal would partially restore the trust that were made in 2018, which have yet been used to prevent increases in runoff, fish kills, and water pollution problems across the state. It estimated the coalition's proposal would use an average of $1.92 per month to pay for projects to clean up our waterways. However, Florida's water management district fees are not enough to cover the costs of maintaining the waterways. A recent study indicates that Florida's water management district fees are not enough to cover the costs of maintaining the waterways.

These numbers are encouraging and reflect the concern of people: how to do this much less personal commitment in terms of our own benefits, funding and legislative action. During this year's legislative session in Tallahassee, bills authored by our own legislators Sam, Debbie Lindsey and Bill Day were passed, providing the potential to significantly reduce pollution from point sources, wastewater treatment facilities and stormwater discharges. These measures were backed by the governor. While these bills represent meaningful steps in the right direction, much more is needed. Without specific regulations, the pollution of our waterways will continue to harm our economy, our health and the quality of life of the people moving into the state.

We need to look at how we treat the Indian River Lagoon is doing.

Florida's water management districts are uniquely qualified to administer grant programs utilizing these funds. This regional approach to funding should aware each region to address high priority needs. Guidelines need to be developed to ensure that Florida's waterways become the nation's most in terms of preservation instead of restored.

Our economy and environment are interwoven, providing jobs, recreation and attracting visitors from throughout the world. We need to preserve the unique waters for the benefit of all, including the generations to come.

Mike Linton, Clerk-County Commissioner at the Brevard Indian River Lagoon Coalition.