The Republican dilemma

COMMENTARY
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roger WILLIAMS
rwilliams@floridaweekly.com

With the possible exception of the Civil War, the single most dire threat to a secure Florida future for any generation in the 173-year history of the Sunshine State is now upon us.

Not even the Great Depression or World War II can compare to the threat that could end life here as we know it by 2100, 82 years from now.

We're on the verge of an ecosystem collapse our young children will inherit.

While climate change and the warming oceans will flood some of our most populated coastal communities in the next few decades, we have a more pressing problem: Our own toxic freshwaters now extend throughout Florida, but in particular through the southern half of the peninsula.

From Orlando and Tampa south almost 200 miles to Florida Bay, we've poisoned ourselves.

This is the current picture: The 143-mile dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee can't contain the water flowing into it each year. The water can't filter southward to Florida Bay as it has for the previous 5,000 years without flooding the 741,000-acre Everglades Agricultural Area, created in 1948 and still supported by U.S. taxpayers, and surrounding towns.

Water in the lake is already polluted by decades of Orlando-area runoff, agricultural runoff and back-pumping from the EAA, no longer a common practice.

The lake's managers release water east and west when the depth threatens the dike. The already polluted water picks up more pollutants from old, unregulated septic systems and both sewer and city runoff on its downstream course to the sea.
Marine life and humans along the river and at the coasts suffer the consequences. So do the southern Everglades and Florida Bay, where about 95 percent of the bird life that existed in 1900 is gone, scientists estimate.

Meanwhile, 6 million residents of southeast Florida who depend on the vast Biscayne aquifer underlying the southern Everglades are at risk of losing their drinking water because fresh water no longer filters through the system in sufficient quantities to push back the intruding saltwater.

The current devastating algal blooms both in fresh water and salt east and west of Lake Okeechobee, therefore, are bell-ringing notifications: We're on the verge of rendering Florida uninhabitable.

While fish-killing toxic red tide, a salt-water algae, and the blue-green bacterial algae that can sicken or kill people sometimes years after they've encountered it in fresh water are natural occurrences, both seem to explode in warming waters when fueled by agricultural and septic pollutants, natural or not.

Worst of all, we've continued to pollute our waters while fully recognizing a coming disaster we had chances to stop — especially in the last eight years.

In 1960, when both air conditioning and mosquito control became widespread, there were 5 million Florida residents. Since then, Florida leaders have tended to put in place regulations that managed growth, reduced pollution, and sought to avoid the crisis that now confronts us as our population exceeds 20 million.

But that bipartisan tendency changed in 2010. Republicans led by Gov. Rick Scott have disassembled the old model for living that required enforced regulation of development and protection of water, instead creating a state the governor calls "business friendly."

I am sorry to say, Republicans have allowed most of the current catastrophe by willfully avoiding opportunities to head it off. The reason I am sorry to say it is personal: Some of the brightest, most vibrant people I know are Republicans (or Libertarians) and a few have been stung by my comments.
One friend responded bitterly this way, in a Facebook post: “You must be right, 'cause eight years ago none of the vectors were in place leading to today's disaster, the Caloosahatchee was pristine, and that $1.8 billion dike repair hadn't even been imagined. Clearly, only one group of miscreants were involved in creating the problem. They're all the same, those Republicans. Not even really human, like you, at all. How can you stand even sharing facilities? Time for separate drinking fountains and bathrooms, for a start.”

So I am sorry, but the facts, now widely reported, remain these: Gov. Scott killed the Florida Forever conservation program established by Gov. Jeb Bush.

In 2012, he backed off the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, claiming with fellow Republicans it would create undue burdens to business owners by enforcing clean-water standards that might have prevented or at least greatly reduced the severity of the current devastation.

He defunded and weakened the state's Department of Environmental Protection, firing 58 DEP employees.

He dropped enforcement cases against polluters from about 2,300 to about 800 in his first two years as governor.

He cut the budgets of Florida's five water-management districts roughly in half, letting go longtime, knowledgeable employees and bringing in real estate lawyers, developers and business people to manage the districts.

He weakened standards for toxic chemicals allowed to flow into state waters.

He signed a law preventing local governments in Florida from banning Styrofoam and polystyrene in products.

He supported offshore drilling while pretending he didn’t, as emails between Gov. Scott and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke revealed.

He dismantled the Department of Community Affairs that tracked and controlled big development in the state, monitoring and measuring the potential effect of any proposed development on wetland and water resources.

And he resisted and ignored proposals to restore the Harmful Algal Bloom task force that was decommissioned in 2001; that single failure to act, alone, likely played a prominent role in the algal explosion we've faced along the Caloosahatchee River to the gulf at Charlotte Harbor, and along the St. Lucie River to the Indian River Lagoon and the Atlantic, at Stuart.

And now he wants to be a U.S. senator.

What are the many Republicans who care about Florida's future going to do?