

Annual Water Resources Conference projects the future

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The steering committee of the 26th Annual Southwest Florida Water Resources Conference is tasked each year to predict the future.

And Mary Rawl, one of the conference committee members, said the group is predicting a need for people to get creative to fund water projects.

"Whenever there is a water project, you can't go on your own," said Mary Rawl, Committee Member. "You need to partner."

The topic of this year's conference is Cooperative Solutions: Working Together to Address Water Challenges.

The conference is scheduled for Friday, Jan. 13, and will be held in the Cohen Center Ballroom at Florida Gulf Coast University. Registration begins at 8 a.m. and the conference will run until 4:30 p.m., followed by a social networking hour.

Local speakers will include Ray Judah, former Lee County Commissioner; Richard Bartleson of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation; and Jennifer Hecker, Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program.

Fact Box

If You Go

* What:

26th Annual Southwest Florida Water Resources Conference

* When:

8 a.m.to 4:30 p.m.,

Friday, Jan. 13

* Where:

Cohen Center Ballroom at Florida Gulf Coast University, 10501 FGCU Blvd. South, Fort Myers.

* Cost:

Registration costs vary.

Visit awra.caloosahatchee.org for information.

The day is broken up into four breakout sessions and a keynote speaker. Each session will delve into a different issue related to the conference's big-picture topic.

Rawl said many communities in Florida, and around the nation, are experiencing the same problem: aging water-related infrastructure. Stormwater mitigation, drinking water, sewage water treatment: old systems are breaking down and funding new ones is expensive.

According to the American Society of Civic Engineers's "report card" on the country's infrastructure, the county is currently earning a D in water infrastructure.

"Between aging infrastructure, rapid growth and weather extremes, there are a backlog of water projects to be done," Rawl said. "And government funding - we can't get it."

She, and the rest of the committee, believe that as infrastructures across the country break down, communities will have to "get creative" with funding solutions to address critical needs.

That is what the conference will focus on: public-private partnerships in water projects.

Water is turning into a commodity, Rawl said, so nationally, investors are turning an eye to putting money into such infrastructure projects as a profitable endeavor.

The conference is often attended by local elected officials and representatives from other organizations, but Rawl said the general public is not just welcome but very encouraged to attend. High school and college students can get scholarships to attend, as well.

"We try to bring in local government officials, planning and legal, because land use decisions affect our water usage in Florida," she said. "We encourage citizens to come too, it's not just for the 'science geeks'."

The conference also selects the winner for the state-wide high school, undergraduate and graduate student water resources research poster contest.

"Everyone learns something, whether they are seasoned professionals or someone off the street," Rawl said.

To register for the conference, visit awra.caloosahatchee.org. Registration costs vary.