Please Lee County Commissioners, don't deplete 20/20 funds

Joan Marshall  Published 12:11 p.m. ET July 27, 2018

In a 2016 referendum over 83 percent of the voters of Lee County affirmed their support for the popular Conservation 20/20 program, which is vital to both our fresh water supply and our quality of life.

However, there remains a troubling question: Will the Lee County Board of Commissioners honor the will of the people regarding Conservation 20/20?

That's what the Climate Action Team of the All Faiths Unitarian Congregation set out to determine after attending the commissioners workshop on May 15 that reviewed the proposed changes to the management of this ongoing program of land acquisition and conservation.

Team members Linda Bigelow and Joan Marshall were startled to learn that although there are currently properties valued at between $54 million and $70 million under consideration for purchase, the trust fund balance is only $44,536,038. Clearly, the fund is in danger of rapid depletion, yet the proposed changes would allocate replenishment of the fund at the rate of only $3 million a year over the next five years.

This is inadequate at a time of anticipated dynamic population growth and the attendant demand for land development. As Commissioner Frank Mann pointed out at the workshop, this failure to adequately fund the program could lead to its demise in the near future.

How did we get to this brink of disaster? To find out, the Climate Action Team delved into the history of the 20/20 fund. Relevant facts reveal a referendum establishing the program in 1996 included a 0.5 mil ad valorem tax to be set aside in a Conservation 20/20 Trust Fund that would be used for future purchases of conservation land. And, indeed, that is exactly what happened.

By 2008, 20,000 acres of conservation land had been acquired. But that rate of acquisition slowed dramatically. Ten years later, the total acreage is 28,979, and that includes the 2017 Edison Farms acquisition of 3,922 acres. What happened?

In 2013, faced with a budget deficit in the Lee County general fund, the board found a legal loophole that allowed them to divert the trust fund taxes and use those dollars to balance the budget. That diversion became permanent, and Conservation 20/20 no longer has a direct source of funding. It is dependent upon allocations from the general fund for its survival.

Essentially, the board converted a voter-approved conservation tax into a general tax increase. If the original funding of 0.5 mil had remained in effect, it would have brought in over $150 million over the past five years, and today, we would be celebrating the purchase of such desirable land acquisitions as the property being offered to Lee County by Babcock Ranch or the watershed property in Lehigh Acres so important to the management of future flooding events. The fund would be strong, and its future would be assured.
Instead, we are asking ourselves, “Will Conservation 20/20 survive?” We believe it will if the public is made aware of the seriousness of the funding problem and once again makes clear they are willing to pay to protect our natural environment and the drinking water supply so essential to our future growth and economy. All Faiths Unitarian Congregation has sent a letter to the five commissioners expressing our support for this program. Over seventy-eight members and friends of the congregation signed this letter, and many of them plan to call the commissioners in person.

The commissioners postponed any decision about the adoption of the proposed program changes until their August sessions. There is still time for the public to come to the rescue of this now threatened program. You can contact the commissioners on the website: www.leegov.com/bocc.

Joan Marshall, a Fort Myers resident, is co-Leader of the Climate Action Team at All Faiths Unitarian Congregation.