

News Press

Dec 15, 2013

MAILBAG

Preserving space

Re: "Time for a talk about 20/20 ," Dec. 8. The Conservation 20/20 program first came to our attention a few years ago when we started spending our winters in Estero. How impressed we were that the voters of Lee County had the foresight to create such a program to preserve open space.

We had moved from Dutchess County, N.Y., where we sadly watched acres and acres of beautiful dairy farms being bulldozed into tracts of housing developments.

How we wished there was a 20/20 program then. With disappointment, we now learn that this year's 20/20 money was used to plug a deficit in the county general fund.

Such shortsighted action puts this program, and all the good it has done, at risk. We agree with Mary Rawl (Calusa Nature Center director) that preserving open space is more important than ever, not only for the tourism dollars it generates but for the environmental quality it ensures for all of us. Once open space is gone, you don't get it back.

Gail Hermosilla, Estero

Theft by deception

I attended the county commission Conservation 20/20 work session, Dec. 10, and observed that Mr. Hammond made about the only intelligent comment regarding the 20/20 issue and the public's interest therein. He said that people are asking how it is that money they voted to be used only "in trust" for the purchase, preservation and maintenance of lands has somehow been stolen from that public trust and diverted into yet another commission slush fund, i.e., the general fund, over which the public has absolutely no control. The board did the exact same thing with the old Sanibel Causeway maintenance funds and that is exactly why we are paying a \$6 toll today.

I term this little political maneuver nothing but bad "theft by deception."

Disclosure: I am a retired prosecuting attorney. In the county commission's view, these purpose-specific public monies are to be dipped into in order to cover their own budget deficits brought upon by their very own mismanagement, whim, or malfeasance. With these actions, last year and looking forward, you are destroying Conservation 20/20, which I believe is the plan in the first place, in order to have unfettered access to 20/20 money, the public wishes be damned. You are fooling no one.

The Lee County commission has lost all credibility and trust with the public, if it ever had any.

If the commission can get away with this now, who's to say the next commission will not be just as craven as the present one. The board was puzzling over what "in perpetuity" means: it means a long time. Not just until the next election cycle or until the next one of you gets indicted, whichever comes first.

Giving this board and future boards' access and control of 20/20 funds is just as effective as giving our current congressman cocaine. It will just go right up your nose.

James E. Sheets, Fort Myers