Blaming media for bad water news is wrong

Editorial

We have a polluted water crisis on our hands, and apparently the Tourist Development Council wants you to believe it is the fault of the media, because we keep writing and showing video about it.

At Thursday’s TDC meeting both Fort Myers Beach Mayor Anita Cereceda and Lee County Commission chairman Frank Mann blamed the media for their words and pictures, and said we should keep that news to ourselves, and write more about the positive things occurring in our area. Those views are both narrow minded and wrong.

The facts are the pollutants flowing down the Caloosahatchee from Lake Okeechobee releases are discoloring our water, killing the sea grass, killing marine life, causing algae blooms and red tide and generally making life miserable for those who want to enjoy our pristine beaches and use the water. The facts are if these massive releases – needed to lower lake levels and protect the dike - continue and they are supposed to, at least through the weekend, there won’t be a lot of positives because tourists don’t want to come to an environmental sewer.

It is the responsibility of the media to report the news, not keep people in the dark about what is happening around them. Most of it is positive, but issues that impact our community in a negative way are also very much a part of life. It is the responsibility of the TDC to help promote and protect our valuable resources.

Unprecedented rainfall this winter, especially in January, changed the environmental game for all us – the media trying to stay on top of breaking news from the Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District about the water releases and the TDC on how to spend promotion dollars wisely to encourage tourists and residents to stay in area hotels, dine at restaurants, shop and visit the beaches.

Our officials have blamed the media before for life’s detours. When the real estate crisis hit several years ago, and we slogged through a recession, the media was blamed for spilling too much ink on the topic. By the media not reporting on it, or somehow ignoring it, does not mean it doesn’t exist. It was very real, and we reported on that reality.

The reality: the bad water and the damage that it is causing currently and what is still be upstream. The spigot is mostly wide open, and water is pouring into the river at a rate of about 70,000 gallons a second. This week has been one of declarations and renewed promises to solve this growing environmental disaster. Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen, R-Fort Myers, urged Gov. Rick Scott to stop the freshwater releases and call for a study of the "fiscal and ecological impacts of the releases" on the area. Scott said the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission issued orders to allow feds to redirect water through the Shark River Slough in the Everglades, instead of the east and west coasts. Sanibel mayor Kevin Ruane stressed the importance of building water storage facilities, and possibly using Conservation 20/20 land to help us get to that goal. Environmentalists continue to complain about back pumping into Lake O and the harmful nutrients that brings from agriculture. And, of course, the overall message, and the most significant one, is to restore a flow way south to the Everglades and stop the north-south releases that plague both coasts.

We know the good the TDC does in bringing tourists here and promoting our treasures. We know what the area gives us, from the environment to tourism, to millions of dollars for the economy. We will continue to write about those positives. We know that as long as Lake O rises, the releases will continue to damage our estuary until other solutions are found. And we will continue to write about that as well.