

Tammy Hall: Proposed environmental rule changes could affect economy

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On Friday, I have the privilege of participating in a seminar hosted by the Southwest Florida Chamber of Commerce regarding balancing water quality needs in our struggling economy.

The impetus behind this seminar is the various proposed rule changes being considered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. I am glad to take part in this program along with DEP Secretary Mike Sole and other state and local leaders.

I am particularly pleased that the Chamber is sponsoring this event. It is important that the business leaders of our community take a more active role in environmental issues that have the potential to either bring us out of a sustained economic slump, or possibly make recovery from our economic woes even more prolonged.

As most would agree, a clean and healthy environment is one of the most critical cogs of the economic engine that drives Lee County. The \$3 billion annual contribution that tourism brings depends largely on our unique natural resources. If those resources are not protected from environmental degradation, tourists will find other places to spend their dollars. Additionally, people relocate here to work and reside in an area for many of the same reasons. Our challenge as political and business leaders is to ensure the protection of our natural resources without making growth and managed development cost prohibitive.

The Lee County Commission has been on the forefront of investing in projects and programs that will make certain that our natural resources are preserved and protected. While some may not see the immediate benefit from such decisions, these choices to protect and enhance the natural resources of the county will, in the end, pay huge dividends. I will continue to work to minimize water quality impacts from development and to make growth decisions that are predictable and reasonable and at the same time are cost effective. I also will continue to listen to the residents and work with community leaders regarding development decisions.

We must also strive to make sure that the environmental concerns of Lee County are at the front of the minds of our leaders in Tallahassee and Washington, D. C. We have doggedly pursued the agencies, departments, and our elected officials to invest with us in the protection of Lee County's natural resources. We have made great strides in recent years, but the effort must be kept up.

That takes us back to Friday's seminar on proposed new water quality rules that will set numeric limits on water pollution.

While the topic may not be as riveting as college basketball's March madness, it is of critical concern to the well being of the County. There are those that have said these new regulations will place standards on communities and property owners that can not be reasonably achieved. While in some cases this may be true, rather than fighting the agencies responsible for setting the standards we must work with them to establish rules that are predictable, reasonable and affordable. It's good to have the business leaders, elected officials and environmental advocates coming together to work on such solutions. Our Lee County community depends on it.