In the Public Interest

People, Politics and Power in Tampa Bay's Water Wars

By

Honey Rand

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Dedicated to the people who serve the public interest every day.

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There is no way to thank the people who have been generous with their time and insights for this work. Still, I thank them and hope they believe the outcome is worthwhile.

Without my husband, Jim Randel, this book would not exist. I'm thankful for the encouragement and the occasional kick in the pants.

Preface

Coming Home

Though Boston is among the earliest places settled in the New World, it has maintained strong links to its history. Indeed, it has a booming tourism industry based on visits to old churches and buildings with historical walks and tours. Then there are the parks and green spaces. The green spaces allow locals and visitors to cool off on hot days, enjoy outdoor sports, or lie in the sun daydreaming they are on a Gulf Coast beach in sunny Florida. But Florida hasn't preserved its history nearly as well.

When I was younger, I wanted the old buildings in Sarasota torn down. I loved the new, tall buildings. They made me feel excited about an unlimited potential future. Even so, I left home at seventeen—finishing high school early—and jumpstarted ten years of adventure. To me, Sarasota was a nowhere, nonhappening place. There were two kinds of people; the wealthy who lived at the beach and the those who served them.

My family didn't live at the beach. So I left.

Thirteen years later, after looking all over the world for a better place, I came home. As I sat in the back of the real estate agent's car shopping for a home, I couldn't believe the changes—so many people. The tomato fields east of I-75, where we used to visit "U-Pick-Em" fields, were gone, replaced by one- to five-acre ranchettes and golf courses. "Where," I asked the real estate agent, "did all these people come from, and what do they do for a living?" I couldn't imagine. I came home for a month each year spending my time at the beach. I never noticed the changes. Moving home, I wanted a job that would let me help protect Florida, or at least my little corner of it.

Home at Mote

Mote Marine Laboratory is a marine and environmental research and education center in Sarasota. As a kid, if you found something interesting in the water, you'd call a Mote scientist, who might drive out and pick up

the thing. Now Mote is internationally recognized for its research into sharks and cancer, marine mammals and red tide, fisheries, coral, and turtles. The lab boasts Dr. Sylvia Earle and Dr. Eugenie Clarke among its former executive directors. Dr. Earle is a former chair of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Dr. Clarke is among the most respected shark researchers in the world. Among water environmentalists, these are well-known names.

I loved the work at Mote. More than just professionally and intellectually challenging, it gave me exactly what I wanted, the sense that I was protecting my home in my way. It researched everything from sharks' cancer resilience to the causes of red tide, to sex-change operations for grouper. I loved it; I was a believer, a zealot. If anything, the hardest part for me was that Mote didn't take positions on issues. Mote would conduct research and report that research, but it would not address the policy implications of it. In one respect, this adheres to the pure-science model that is occasionally invoked in policy debates. It's also a way of sidestepping dicey politics, which can affect future funding. On occasion, I wanted Mote to take a stand. I knew that scientists could say things to influence people. I knew Mote could bring credibility to an argument. Then again, that credibility is not to be squandered. Mote never did.

I spent three years at Mote. We got lots of great news coverage on the research. I managed a national campaign, the Year of the Gulf of Mexico, which brought money into operations and put us in newspapers and publications around the country. I had a knack for translating science into ideas that made sense to people, and the job gave me what I wanted: an opportunity to use my communication skills to help people understand that protecting Florida is everyone's job.

At Mote's open house one year, I met the communication director for the Southwest Florida Water Management District. He told me that he was leaving his job and that the position might interest me—"if you can stand the Rottweilers," he said, exchanging knowing glances with another colleague we knew. "Who are they?" I asked. "Gene Schiller and Mark Farrell," he said, with apparent disdain. The names meant nothing to me.

In May 1993, I was preparing for the Mississippi River Project, a part of the Year of the Gulf of Mexico designed to help educate people about the pollution in the Mississippi River contributing to a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Vice President Al Gore had promised to attend a water-quality testing event in Memphis. We were taking ten thousand students in fifteen states out the same day at roughly the same time to test water quality. We were going to create a satellite link from the students at the Mississippi's headwaters to the outfall in New Orleans. A satellite link in those days was expensive. I would be in Memphis with the vice president. I had a lot on my mind.

It was one week before the event when the water-management district posted its advertisement for a director of communication. I didn't even see it—but Jim Randel, my husband, did. A week before a national event with the vice president, the last thing I wanted to think about was my résumé. Applying meant a cover letter, portfolio preparation, and comparison of my skills to their needs. There was no time. Still, Jim persisted.

"The job will be closed by the time you get back from Memphis," he claimed.

"Will you get off my back, if I do?" I asked.

"I'll even do your résumé if you'll tell me what to do," he said.

So we prepared, and he applied. That was April.

In October, a call came from Eugene Schiller—one of the Rottweilers. We talked. I liked him.

"So what brought my résumé to the top of the pile on your desk?" I asked. Gene gave me some benign response that made me think I might not be able to easily rock his boat.

I always liked a challenge.

More than 750 applicants sought the job. Two rounds of interviews had been done, but Gene and the other executives were waiting for someone—they didn't know who. They invited me to District headquarters to talk.

The Interview at the District

It was November when I drove north to Brooksville. I was escorted upstairs, where I waited a few minutes before being taken to a small conference room. Gene Schiller stood to greet me as I came in. A blonde woman was seated at the conference table; she introduced herself as Linda Sullivan, director of boards and executive support. A tall guy stood at the head of the table. Peter Hubbell was the executive director. Another man remained seated, though we shook hands it was Mark Farrell was the other Rottweiler. Gene gave a preliminary introduction and explained the procedure. This was a panel interview. There were set questions, but each participant was able to ask follow-up questions at will. Then they began. Mark Farrell leaned his chair back against the wall, tipped on two legs. He couldn't be less interested. He was the one I needed to engage.

I remember two specific things about the interview. First, it was clear they needed someone to fix their communications department. Many of the questions focused on staff relations, structuring the work, and creating a management culture. I got the best reaction when I shared that I had previously fired a federal employee. It's an onerous process. Clearly, that's what they needed. Second, I made them laugh. In response to a question about whether I would be able to go into the executive director's office and pound on his desk until I got his attention, I told a story about the death of Buster the Jewfish (the jewfish has been renamed the goliath grouper) at Mote:

> Buster the Jewfish was a four-hundred-pound grouper who lived in the public aquarium at Mote. One morning I came in and was informed by the volunteers that Buster had died that night. When I went to investigate, I found that samples had not been taken for the scientists. They were upset that Buster had been hauled out into the Gulf and unceremoniously dumped by the lab boat captain, who didn't want anyone to mention anything about Buster to anyone.

> "People will notice that a four-hundred-pound fish is missing," I said. "People will think the worst if we don't tell them the truth." We argued, but he was determined. So was I. We could not allow Buster's demise to remain a mystery. The scientists needed their samples, and I needed a cause of death. I appealed to the executive director, who eventually relented. While I was in his office, a call came in. Buster's remains had floated to the surface of the Gulf and were reported heading inshore. The captain went out to recover Buster, but instead of bringing him back to the lab for tests, he took some samples and shot the fish full of holes, hoping to fill the carcass with water and sink it. It was too late. When he got back, we continued our argument about the disposal of Buster. But later that afternoon, we got a call from the manager of a condominium complex on Longboat Key. A massive fish had washed up on the beach, and it had gunshot wounds! They wanted a Mote scientist to come right away and investigate. ("Do you think it was suicide?" I asked, sarcastically.) It was as if Buster wasn't happy with the way he'd been handled and kept coming back until we could get it right. Someone took a backhoe and buried Buster on the beach, where he rests today (we hope) in peace. . .

I intended to be funny, and the illustration was humorous, but it told them I would be willing to "pound on someone's desk" to get their attention if I needed to.

I had them howling. Even Mark. I showed them my portfolio and waited until the last question: "If you were selected for this position, when could you start?" "I've already resigned from my job at Mote," I told them. I felt that it was time to find a more complex assignment. Mote was very busy, and a lot of fun, but the complexity resided in science, not in the ways it was communicated. I wanted more responsibility.

Within days Gene Schiller called and offered me the job.

Home at the District

I started to work for the District before my official start day. I attended the Governing Board meeting in November 1993. Gene Schiller had already told me the Governing Board wanted to "do something about communications." There was a drought, the District been pounded in the media for several years over its failure to provide leadership and take stronger stands to protect the environment, and the board wanted a new direction in communication. Part of that included the allocation of $300,000 for a public education program called Do Your Part, based on research that demonstrated that people were willing to conserve water during low rainfall but only if their neighbors did. The Do Your Part campaign was based on behavior modeling. We would show people how others "just like them" had saved water. The program had great examples of homeowners, agriculture, industry, and business. We used real people with real stories. I attended the November meeting of the Finance Committee, which funded the program. Executives wanted me to go in and explain the program to the Finance Committee. To sell it.

At the meeting, the board members, clearly annoyed with the public-communications staff, turned to me and began to question the program. I'd been sitting in a chair against the wall. Not knowing any better, I pulled my chair up to the table where the board sat and began to explain the broad concepts and the specifics of the program. It was my first test. We got the money for the program. As we walked back to my office, staff and consultants were elated. "Finally," said one. "Now let's get going." Things were about to get going, but none of us had any idea just how much.

Chapter 1
They Could See It Coming

Steve Monsees stood before the Governing Board of the Southwest Florida Water Management District. He was nervous and angry. The hundred-acre lake in front of his house was nearly dry, going the way of the pond behind his house. Steve had seen drought before, but he was convinced that it was not the result of drought. It was something else. He went to the Governing Board to ask for help. He gripped the sides of the podium as he faced them. They looked back impassively. Many citizens had addressed the board before. The board had heard their stories, and they would hear his. But this time was different. Monsees, a retired Green Beret, had decided that this time they would hear him, or they would be very, very sorry.

Water Isn't Everything; It's the Only Thing

No matter how you get news, issues about water dominate, and not just in Florida. There's too much or too little. There are plenty of water-quality issues, too. Some occur naturally, but far more are driven by human activity or failure to plan and invest. That's true for the developed world, but less so in developing countries. And more frequently today there are climate refugees where, again, too much or too little rainfall affects farming and even subsistence living.

In July 2023 the Food and Agricultural Organization urged countries to prepare for water shortages that will affect five billion people across the world. Three billion people living in agricultural areas already experience water scarcity. About 57 percent of the global population will likely face water shortages by 2050 for at least a month every year.

In the US and likely elsewhere, there are the intentional and accidental the incompetent and other causes that cause worry about water quality. Consider Flint, Michigan, where public officials sent contaminated water to a largely minority community and have gone to jail over decisions to go use cheaper, unsafe drinking-water sources. There is Camp Lejeune, where

drinking-water supplies were contaminated with industrial solvents. Marines and their families drank that water for decades. There are others—too many others. Alabama, Florida, and Georgia have been in litigation for nearly thirty years. The Rio Grande has fostered conflict between Texas and Mexico. Withdrawals from the Colorado River are dwindling. And while states receiving water have agreed to cuts, except California, smaller users are finding lowered flows may be too low for their intake pipes. The Mississippi River flows are so low that shipping commerce is affected.

Conflict over water isn't limited to the United States. There are conflicts over the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, the Jordan River, and the Nile. In March 2023, the United Nations urged more countries join the Water Convention to reduce tensions and improve international relations.

In August 2023, the *New York Times* reported that while countries invested in reservoirs, they are filling far more slowly than anticipated. Ever-increasing demand, coupled with changing weather patterns, forces water suppliers to seek new sources, additional conservation, and technology. There is ever-increasing demand and ever-increasing cost.

And in another article, the *New York Times* found that groundwater across the US has declined significantly over the past forty years as more water has been pumped out than nature can replenish.

Florida is the envy of most other states when it comes to water. Florida has, theoretically, abundant rainfall, except when it doesn't. Florida's subtropical climate demands abundant water to maintain ecological health and provide habitat for wildlife. Its beautiful estuaries need freshwater flows to maintain their health. Wetlands hold the water generated from hurricanes and drenching summer rains, but wetlands are threatened by a recent Supreme Court decision. Wetland protection may now largely lie in local elected officials who have rarely shown deference to decisions good for the long haul. Florida's aquifers, the primary drinking-water source for most people, farms, and businesses, are recharged by rainfall. But like the rest of the world, Florida suffers from periodic and prolonged drought and changing weather patterns.

Twenty-five years ago, the Tampa Bay region was gripped by a terrible drought. The Southwest Florida Water Management District had permitted too much water to be taken by local-government public suppliers. Water wellfields in northwest Hillsborough and central Pasco Counties were worked harder and harder, and in the process nearby lakes and ponds were sucked dry. Wetlands, too. People living near the wellfields complained but were assured by technicians at the District that eventually the system would reach "stasis," meaning the water levels would reset, probably at a lower level, and the unrelenting decline of surface waters would stop; but the system never reached stasis. And that water wasn't serving locals. It was piped to coastal Pinellas County and St. Petersburg, where lawns were green and lush.

St. Petersburg's water permit was in for review at the District. It had been for two years. As the drought worsened and the water pumping continued, environmental damage spread beyond the wellfields, affecting tens of thousands of acres of wetlands. District staff were alarmed and had been studying the situation for years, knowing that if they reduced the allocation of water to local governments, there would be political fallout the region had never seen.

That was the situation when I became the director of communication for the Southwest Florida Water Management District. Public support, according to its latest survey, was less than 25 percent. Less than forty-five days after I arrived at the District, Steve Monsees spoke to the Governing Board, kicking off what became the Tampa Bay water wars.

This book is my account of what happened—the strategies, both legal and communication, the political maneuvering, the unrelenting environmental impacts, the sacrifices, and, ultimately, the resolution. Millions of dollars was spent on litigation that didn't produce one drop of water, then billions of dollars was spent to provide new water supplies and recover the wetlands to the greatest extent possible.

Where Water Comes From

No matter where you live, water comes from a few sources: underground, surface, or technology. The technology category is evolving but includes desalination (removing the salt from water) and exotic ideas, like in Texas, where a university is working on making water from air. Underground water is called groundwater and comes from aquifers, which can be deep or not and can have great quality or not. The quality of water drives the cost of treatment. Surface waters can be rivers or ponds. Surface water generally costs more to treat to drinking-water standards because there are more potential contaminants, but all water is getting more expensive because there is higher demand for a limited resource. There is no new water. Earth has a finite quantity, and until recently, most of it was locked into glaciers, but that is an entirely different issue. Technologies like desalination can let us tap the ocean for water, but the energy to extract salt from it is costly in many ways beyond actual expense. Typically coupled with traditional power plants using carbon-based fuels, desalination can add to the greenhouse gas issue, which is driving climate change. In the last ten years, desperate communities have turned to recycled or purified water: the wastewater plants treat water to near-drinking-water standards and discharge it into natural systems to rehydrate them; or they actually close the water loop by treating the wastewater, then sending it back to the drinking-water system to be repurified and sent to customers. It's perfectly safe but suffers from what the industry calls the yuck factor. The media often call it "toilet to tap." That's a technological solution, and it's being used in California and Texas and other typically water-poor states, though Florida has been testing the concept, too.

The thing is, no matter where our water comes from, there is a cost. Take too much water from the natural system, and the environment suffers. That's what happened in Tampa Bay. Too much of the good, cheap water was taken from underground, during a drought, and it had a devastating environmental and human impact.

Even though the water sources are the same, eastern and western water law are very different. In general, the western US supports private water rights and ownership, while eastern water law generally assumes water is public

property. That said, private companies can and do get water permits and develop water for sale (that's where all that bottled water at the grocery comes from). When people think about water wars, they think of the West, but the truth is that everywhere there is competition for a limited resource, there is conflict. Cities compete against each other; agriculture competes with cities, golf courses, industry, and recreation, all of which need water. So does the environment. These competing needs create conflict.

The Development of Florida

For most of its history, Florida was considered uninhabitable. Early journals of adventurers, naturalists, and military professionals provide a rich testament to Florida's harsh environment. The central part of the state was considered worthless, full of swamps, mosquitoes, and the "most disagreeable creatures." Nelson Blake's book, *Land into Water, Water into Land*, details how development in Florida is linked to water. He points out that to many of the early visitors to Florida, it possessed a dangerous superfluity—too much water, too much heat, too many strange creatures. There were huge snakes and "such clouds of mosquitoes that travelers sometimes feared for their lives. Even more terrifying were the alligators and crocodiles."

Setting the pattern for Florida's development following the Civil War, Congress established financial mechanisms for ditches, dams, and dikes to control and channel the water, to increase cross-state navigation, and to make Florida more habitable. Florida's overabundance of water had to be controlled. It would be incomprehensible to Florida's early conquerors that a problem of too little water could ever exist here. The earliest settlers and visitors viewed this semitropical paradise in terms of its water abundance. Indeed, more often than not, the problem in Florida has been too much water, not too little. To their thinking, less water meant more land, more land meant more development, more development equaled more growth, and that meant increased prosperity and a better quality of life overall. In *Some Kind of Paradise* author Mark Derr notes that few people at the time understood how Florida's wetness created its exotic appearance and supported its rich diversity of plant and animal life.

While Florida was home to conquering Spanish explorers for hundreds of years and to Native American tribes before that, European settlers from northern climates did not particularly value the state until Reconstruction, after the Civil War. First, doctors recommended Florida's warm climate and warm mineral springs for medical reasons. But once guests arrived they discovered mild winter climates and balmy beaches. That created new and desirable vacation destinations. Florida's abundant and exotic wildlife provided exciting new material for the nation's growing interest in nature and for the naturalists who documented it and the industrialists who exploited it.

In the last century, Florida saw its water resources as a nuisance to be controlled, managed, and diverted. Unlike other states, Florida's water resources appeared abundant because of hurricanes, storms, and natural features like the Everglades, a vast wetland. Consequently, early efforts at water management in Florida consisted primarily of dredging and draining anything wet.

Florida became a US possession through a treaty with Spain in 1822. When Florida became a state in 1845, the federal government owned most of the land. To encourage growth, it deeded land back to the state. Federal lands granted to the state were placed under the control of the Internal Improvement Fund (IIF), a state agency responsible for development. The key to future growth was transportation. While railways were slowly making their way down the Eastern Seaboard, Savannah, Georgia, was considered one of the last encampments of civilization. Jacksonville enjoyed a solid reputation as a location with amenities, but the balance of Florida's coastal settlements remained isolated enclaves of lush tropical splendor. For real development to occur, the railways needed to reach down the coast to make way for supplies, goods, and people, according to Blake.

However, Florida's harsh terrain, wet landscapes, and severe tropical weather, along with the resistance of native Indian populations, made laying track a costly and questionable investment. To encourage the effort, the IIF sold large parcels of land at bargain rates to railroad investors.

On top of the cheap land, the IIF added incentives like land grants and options on future land purchases if agreed-upon goals were met. In addition to encouraging the railroads, this tactic made it possible for the IIF to raise funds for what some believed was its primary goal: draining the swamps. It is not an overstatement to suggest that many saw "improving" the state—making it suitable for new residents and for visitors—required draining the water. Natural history scholars and environmentalists have documented the details of the various plans to drain Florida's swamps to create more fertile farmland and land for development.

The impact on Florida's natural systems and the cost of restoring them are now and will continue to be significant to Floridians and the rest of the country. From well before this century till now, water and its control have been central to state politics. The fights over water have been variously ugly and ridiculous.

A 1944 report from Florida's first water commission signaled the initial statewide interest in water resources. The citizens' committee was to study Florida's "freshwater situation"; the commission was also asked to propose legislation for corrective action.

While that legislation failed, a Water Survey and Research Division was established within the State Board of Conservation. A work of the Florida Water Resources Study Commission was published in 1956 and began with an inventory of water problems. Those problems were recognized before the unprecedented growth of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and well into the real estate bubble of the twenty-first century. It was a time before real urban sprawl, before many endangered and threatened species were identified, before the ecology movement, and before demand for water resources outstripped the available supply.

Of equal importance in the 1956 report is a section on Florida's water laws. Florida subscribes to eastern-US water laws, which hold that water is a public resource belonging to the citizens. The state holds water in trust for the benefit of the people. This system is substantially different from western-US water law, which assures landowner rights to the water on, under, or near their land—based on historical usage. Despite public

ownership, the battles over water in Florida are no less contentious than those in California. The first recommendation in the 1956 report was that "a comprehensive water law be established in Florida." Other key recommendations of the report dealt with their revision, supervision, and implementation.

In 1964, Florida's Water Resources Act established funding for a comprehensive study of Florida's water laws. Frank Maloney and Sheldon Plager prepared the resulting book. Plager had once been chairman of the Water Law Committee for the Florida Water Resources Study Commission. He later became its general counsel. Plager was a research assistant to the commission. Their 1968 book, *Water Law and Administration: The Florida Experience*, is a unique document. The conclusion to their detailed effort is eerily prescient: "Failure to undertake such planning now will lead to hit-or-miss solutions which may well result in the freezing of water use patterns in uneconomic and poorly planned projects. . . . Now is the time for Florida to chart her course and provide the legal framework for a sound water-resources program looking toward maximum beneficial use of Florida's most precious natural resource."

By the 1950s, Florida's temperate climate had made it a popular winter home for visitors the world over. Florida's east coast was already well developed by the time Florida's west coast was discovered. In the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed as if everyone wanted to live in Florida. Water-supply and development policies for Florida were not very different from those of other states. But Florida's appealing coasts, its position as a gateway to Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean, its low taxes, and the cooperation of government made it a prime location for development.

The idea of protecting natural environmental systems is a relatively new one. The first Earth Day was held in 1970—more than fifty years ago—just as Florida's growth exploded. Few people really understood how growth would impact natural systems. Fewer still suspected that Florida might have insufficient water resources to provide for its exploding population without suffering severe environmental consequences. Most people believed the water supply was inexhaustible.

But booming populations in West Central Florida have quintupled in the intervening years. According to the US Census Bureau, the Tampa Bay area led the way in 2017 as one of three metro areas in Florida that were among the nation's biggest gainers in the number of people moving there the previous year. The Tampa area had the nation's fourth-highest gain from people moving there in 2016—some fifty-eight thousand new residents. All of them need water.

This growth is reflected in Florida's water history, resulting in conflicts and environmental trade-offs. It is there today.

While various environmental issues exist around the state, this is the story of water-supply policy in the Tampa Bay area. It includes Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas Counties and the cities of St. Petersburg, Tampa, and New Port Richey.

Pinellas County, like Florida, is a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by water. The rapid growth along the beach and bay, which rimmed Pinellas and its coastal cities, is mirrored in Florida's coastal growth. Indeed, Pinellas is the most densely populated community in Florida.

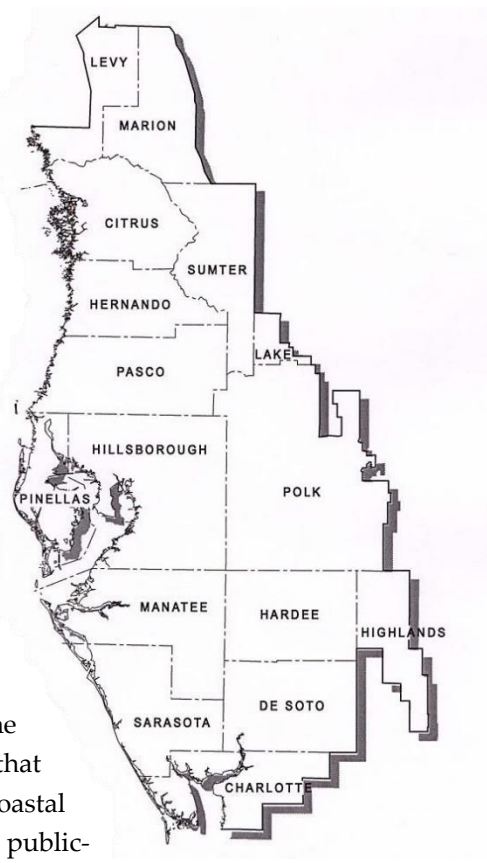
Communities in Southeast Florida had huge water-transfer and water-control structures in place before anyone understood the potential consequences of such policies. But the Tampa Bay development boom came at a time when technology was improving and an environmental ethic was growing among the public. The sources for drinking water were no longer out in the middle of nowhere; they were in the midst of desirable, growing, and largely rural communities.

Tampa Bay's Water History

This water war wasn't the first. For decades, so-called water wars plagued Tampa Bay. Some say the roots of the conflict go as far back as the 1920s, when Hillsborough County extended to the Gulf. Coastal leaders stripped the peninsula out of Hillsborough and created a new county—Pinellas. Others argue that increased demand for a limited water resource created the same problem for the communities of Tampa Bay that it had for

growing communities around the globe, wherever demand for water exceeds a cheap, available resource. Whatever the reasons, the legal and political battles over water supply in Tampa Bay have raged for decades, with a legacy of suspicion, competition, and negative environmental consequences.

As the population along Florida's west coast exploded, so did the demand for water. Between 1970 and 1990, the coastal population in the Tampa Bay area grew nearly 48 percent. Between 1960 and 2017, the population of Florida grew from just under five million residents to almost twenty-one million. Much of coastal Pinellas County, and particularly St. Petersburg, outgrew its water supplies, which were overpumped and spoiled with saltwater intrusion. According to the Water Resources Atlas of Florida, saltwater intrusion is a problem for Florida's coastal communities. Freshwater is surrounded by saltwater, and saltwater is heavier than fresh. Lowering the freshwater levels allows saltwater to seep in, reducing water quality to the point that it becomes undrinkable. Today, sea-level rise is making the situation that much worse and that much faster. Already, some coastal communities have had to abandon public-supply water wells, the only alternative being to desalinate the water. More expense.



To provide water for their residents, Pinellas and St. Petersburg developed water wellfields in sparsely populated Northwest Hillsborough and Central Pasco Counties, located inland, East and North. But as those areas

developed, residents didn't want the big water wellfields in their communities. In some cases, the wellfields were there first; in others, wellfields were installed near established neighborhoods, ranches, and farms. As wellfield pumping increased to meet growing water demand, residents living near the wellfields complained of dropping lake levels and associated impacts they claimed were caused by the wellfields. From the early 1970s until the mid-1990s, their complaints were largely ignored or refuted by government agencies.

In the 1970s, Hillsborough and Pinellas had a bitter feud over where drinking water would come from and where it would go. Pasco County, still quite rural at the time, was only marginally involved. Lawyers were retained, and the political bickering that had festered for decades escalated into the first round of what area newspapers called the Water Wars. As conflict over water escalated, political solutions were sought. Two organizations were central to the resolution of the conflict: the Southwest Florida Water Management District (the water regulator) and the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority (the water-supply wholesaler). Both were established by an act of the Florida legislature.

The two organizations are respectively referred to as the District and the Authority. In the narrative that follows, the District is sometimes called Swiftmud, which is the pronunciation of its acronym (SWFWMD).

The Seeds of Conflict

In an era in which regions compete for clean industries, sporting events, and tourists, the infighting over water resources in the Tampa Bay region had serious economic consequences. The interdependence of community relationships seemingly should strengthen ties and facilitate communication. Conflict over a primary resource—water—threatened to undermine other cooperative economic initiatives. For example, in the 1990s, a Korean microchip factory was considering a new factory site in Florida. Tampa Bay executives worried that headlines over water-supply problems would send the corporation elsewhere in the state. Chip factories require millions of gallons of freshwater for daily production, but they bring high-paying jobs. I was called to meet with a prominent business

leader in Pinellas who, as he told me about the chip factory, complained that the headlines were "killing us."

"You know what happens when we can't get water?" he spat at me.

"Yes. Deals go south."

"No," he snarled; "they go elsewhere." The chip factory wasn't located in Tampa Bay.

The Tampa Bay region's water supply was rainfall dependent. When it rained, there was plenty; when it didn't, the environmental consequences were evident to both the old-timers and the new arrivals. People who lived near the water-supply wellfields provided anecdotal information about problems since the first wellfields were established in the 1980s, but they were ignored or told that their evidence didn't fit the scientific models shared by the District and the Authority. Both the Authority and the District agreed that it was a lack of rainfall—not wellfield pumping—that caused the environmental issues.

By 1987, the District began a comprehensive inventory of water resources in the most impacted area (the area of highest concentrated pumping and water withdrawals). The study took seven years to complete, but well before it was accepted as final, District scientists had determined that, contrary to their prior conclusions, a lack of rainfall was not the primary factor in the environmental impacts to wetlands and lakes in Northwest Hillsborough and Central Pasco Counties. The problems were caused by wellfield pumping. The District reversed its long-standing policy. The people living near the wellfields rapidly allied with the District, as did concerned citizens and the governments of Pasco and Hillsborough Counties.

A water gauge in an impacted wetland, central Pasco County.

The Authority, St. Petersburg, and Pinellas County continued to insist that any environmental issues were due to ditching, damming, drought, and development. The District rejected this premise, and what had been agreement among governments (that insufficient rainfall caused the problem) became a significant battle over water-supply policy. Local governments, citizens, and special interest groups were all actively involved. The District's change in its position became a catalyst for political upheaval and the realignment of political power. The District responded to political pressure in a manner substantially different from ever before—it ignored it. This was disturbing to the Authority, St. Petersburg, and Pinellas County, which had previously pressured the District into adopting policies favorable to them. Moreover, the District's aggressive communications program in support of its new position further aggravated them.

The conflict and drama surrounding water supply in Tampa Bay is a story of the fight for power, money, and control. It was a fight over existing investments and future economic viability. It is also a story about people

who believed they were fighting for the public interest. Everyone involved in this story thought they represented a vital public interest. They disagreed about boundaries and the definition of "the public," and they fundamentally disagreed on where the public interest resided. The story of Tampa Bay's last version of the water wars provides an excellent illustration of how good people with good intentions can fail to reach agreement and how far-reaching the consequences of that failure can be. It is also the story of leadership and vision. This is one perspective on Tampa Bay's water wars. The people, the situations, the challenges, and the choices are like those throughout Florida and Texas, Pennsylvania, Georgia, the Carolinas, and the world. The western US is currently living through what some have called a thousand-year drought. It has less rainfall where it rains and less snowmelt because of climate change. As of 2022, one tiny town in California faced the prospect of running out of water in a few months; another had residents using bottled water for everything.

Water is a limited resource. It's the single most controlling factor for growth. It truly is blue gold. Where there is competition for a finite resource, there will be conflict. That conflict will be played out by people—with the same responsibilities and roles as those in this story.

Chapter 2
The District and the Authority

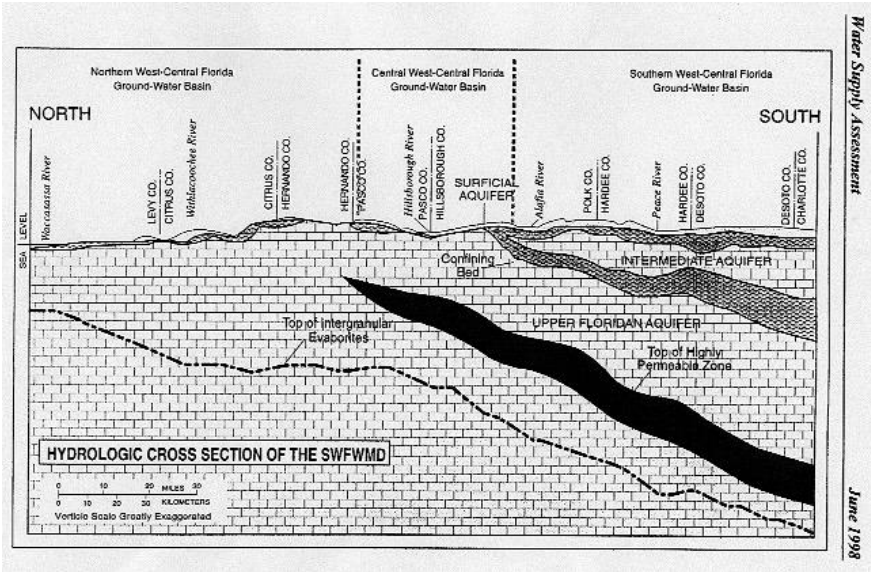
The Southwest Florida Water Management District

Florida is divided into five water management districts based on hydrological features.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District was created in 1961 to manage the flooding in West Central Florida. For years, the District kept a low profile. With a handful of employees, most of them former Army Corps of Engineers staff, the District acted as a funnel for federal dollars aimed at creating large water-control structures.

One example of those projects is the Tampa Bypass Canal, which is a significant water-control structure designed to divert floodwater around the city of Tampa and communities in the vicinity.

But as Florida and Tampa grew, so did the need for environmental management. The Water Resources Act of 1972 expanded every district's authority and provided the legal grounds for water-resource regulation. By the late 1980s, the districts had become water-resource *regulators*—just as people were recognizing the limits of the water supply and the environmental consequences of developing it. Every new water-supply project has an environmental impact. If projects are designed and managed properly, those impacts can be minimized. If they are not, developing water supplies can have severe negative environmental consequences, as it did in Tampa Bay.



In the 1970s, unprecedented growth created intense competition for water in the Tampa Bay area. The solution to the intergovernmental conflict at the time was the establishment of the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority in 1975. The Authority was to collectively develop water supplies for the Tampa Bay area. At the time, Pinellas County was the largest and wealthiest water user, making it the most influential in the region and in the Authority. Pinellas County commissioner Chuck Rainey represented Pinellas County on the Authority board, eventually serving thirty years on the Pinellas Commission and the Authority. There was never any doubt who Commissioner Rainey worked for—the people of Pinellas County. He delivered for them, and water was his issue.

To the other local governments, Rainey was a powerful political force to be challenged only when victory was guaranteed. Of course, in politics, there are few guarantees, so Rainey was seldom challenged.

The District was funded by property tax dollars on an ad valorem basis. The Authority was primarily funded by its member governments.

The Authority's purpose was to provide a mechanism for member governments to develop needed water supplies cooperatively. The premise was that a cooperative agency, comprising the significant communities at