

# Planning for clean water in Sarasota

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VENICE — To borrow liberally from Jimmy Buffet, clean water — everybody wants it, no one has it.

That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but Sarasota County commissioners received a playbook Tuesday that may serve as a guide for future actions as the county endeavors to reduce harmful nutrients making their way into county waterways, and ultimately, its several bays.

An initiative of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the Community Playbook for Clean Water lays out the framework for 42-plus actions that not only the county, but the community at large, can take to improve water quality.

“Despite all of our good work in the past, there’s still some things we can do to improve the water quality conditions

in our community,” said former County Commissioner Jon Thaxton, now the senior vice president for community investment at the Foundation, said Tuesday, leading off the presentation.

Thaxton emphasized the current conditions didn’t begin overnight, and in particular with the current commission, but lay in the decisions by past boards including the one on which he sat.

“I’ll admit our decisions were not the best, but they were based on the data we had at the time,” Thaxton said.

But it’s that scientific data, both current and historic, that drew praise from Thaxton and Steve Suau, a former stormwater manager and planning director for the county.

“The county should get accolades for this, the historical data you’ve been collecting,” Suau, now a

partner in Progressive Water Resources, said. He added that the data helped the team identify both problem areas in the county, and the benefits that could be realized.

Sarasota County is already planning a \$157 million conversion of its Bee Ridge Wastewater Treatment facility to advanced wastewater treatment standards which will greatly reduce the amount of harmful nutrients, including nitrogen, being discharged back into the natural system.

He pointed out that five of the six treatment plants — Bee Ridge, Venice Gardens and Central facilities in the county, and plants in North Port and Venice — all exceeded the nitrogen standard of 3 milligrams per liter. Only the city of Sarasota was under that limit.

“It’s kind of the gold standard,” Suau said.

He pointed to a project in northwest Florida that used a trench filled with sawdust and wood chips that contained organic carbon as an inexpensive means of achieving what he termed “denitrification,” the removal of nitrate from sewage disposal effluent.

Suau, and fellow consultants, Jennifer and David Shafer of Shafer Consulting, with funding from the foundation, took a year-long, “deep dive” into the data to produce the playbook.

The playbook is still in production and not yet available, but Tuesday’s presentation to commissioners was meant as a preview of a portion of their research.

In a memo to commissioners, County Administrator Jonathan Lewis wrote that county staff would be reviewing the information provided as they sought



PHOTO PROVIDED

**Former Sarasota County commissioner Jon Thaxton is an advocate for protecting Florida’s natural environment.**

opportunities for future improvements.

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