

Columbia County Econ Dev: Niagara Gets Thumbs Down

December 30, 2020



Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson and Kristin Rubin opposing toll roads at an M-CORES meeting, 2019. [Ed. note-Ms. Rubin dug the Nestle bottle out of the garbage can to photograph, she did not buy and consume it]. Photo by Jim Tatum.

Columbia County certainly seems to have its challenges when it comes to leadership.

Rather than worry about lost jobs, the county should be grateful that we are saving millions of gallons of potable water (which we cannot afford to waste) and we are avoiding a huge

mess of poisonous plastic pollution going into our cities, countryside, landfill and our bodies. Neither can we afford this pollution. These two issues are a worth many times over any lost income from jobs.

Our report from OSFR attendees is that Niagara offered a terrible deal for the county: this company wanted to have county commitment in 3 weeks time, at the beginning of January, 2021. Then a rigorous schedule in which, a clock starts ticking and if things take longer than expected than there would be hefty fines at perhaps up to \$40,000 per day to Niagara.

Niagara was planning to take 650,000 gallons per day for bottling and 133,000 for wastewater just to start their business here.

Over the course of a few years Niagara was to scale up totaling at 2,760,000 per day.

Lake City does not have that kind of surplus water for this one user. How could any responsible county leader even consider such a devastating deal?

We certainly commend Mr. Murphy and Mr. Keith.

We don't need Niagara and we can't afford Niagara and we must keep them out of Columbia County.

Thanks to Stew Lilker for his exceptional reporting and permission to republish, and also to OSFR board members Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson and Kristin Rubin for their tireless work in looking out for the Santa Fe River.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

jim.tatum@oursantaferiver.org

*– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*



To drive her point home, Merrillee brings a sack of empty plastic water bottles, ready for the landfill, to the meeting.

Columbia County Econ Dev: Niagara Gets Thumbs Down – County Could Lose 150 Potential Jobs

Posted December 29, 2020 11:58 am

County Econ Dev Advisory Board Gives Niagara

Thumbs Down: Estimated Job Loss -- 150



By Stew Lilker

COLUMBIA COUNTY, FL – Last Tuesday, Columbia County's Economic Development Advisory Board, after only 11 minutes and six seconds of discussion about the Niagara Bottling Project, moved to "not to enter into a contract with the company." The decision by

Background: Columbia County Economic Development

For decades, Columbia County, centrally located at the intersection of I-75 and I-10, would have been a natural for economic development. It wasn't.



Commissioner Ronald Williams in his traditional cowboy garb speaks in favor of the project at the EDAB meeting.

Thirty-eight-year veteran commissioner, Ronald Williams, said "bickering" was the cause of lost opportunities.

It wasn't. Over the years, the problems were much deeper, running from keeping cheap labor in the fields to keep higher-paying jobs out of the County, to a lack of vision by Columbia County in 2008, which blew up the opportunity to consolidate the Lake City Utility into a County-wide utility.

In 2012, the County's reconstituted Economic Development Committee had been talking for a year. It was still trying to figure out what it was supposed to do.

When the then newly hired County Economic Development Director Jesse Quillen formulated a mission statement which had the County looking to attract "higher-skill, higher-wage jobs," Commissioner Williams nixed, and the rest of the board nixed the quest for "higher-skill, higher-wage jobs." See: [County Economic Development Committee deep sixes "higher-skill, higher-wage jobs" from its mission statement](#)

Many of those board members are still on the board.

When it comes to the North Florida Mega Industrial Park, formerly Hurricane Bay, the Inland-Port, the Port of the Saggy-Bra, the Intermodal, Plum Creek, and now owned by Weyerhaeuser in its latest incarnation, one thing is clear: the mega-billion dollar company doesn't want to spend its own money on developing the utility infrastructure and the roads at the site, which is private property.

See: [Columbia County Economic Development Weyerhaeuser-Plum Creek Mega Industrial Site, 14 Years Later – Still No Utility Plan](#)

Niagara Looking for a Commitment



EDAB Chairman Tim Murphy (right) discusses City-County utility issues and Interim County Manager David Kraus looks on.

On December 16, representatives of Niagara meet with the County and almost the City. City Manager Joe Helfenberger was out of town and did not designate anyone to sit in for him. County Manager David Kraus and Economic Development Director Glenn Hunter attended the meeting with the attorneys from both the City and County. Assistant County Manager Kevin Kirby also attended.

Economic Development Advisory Board Chairman, Commissioner Tim Murphy, was muted out of the meeting by Commissioner Williams, who got there first.

Neither Commissioner mentioned this during the Economic Development Advisory Board meeting.

It was widely known to County insiders that Commissioner Williams favored the Niagara project, and Commissioner Murphy is opposed.

On December 17, Commissioner Murphy called a special meeting of the Economic Development Advisory Board. The purpose: "To discuss issues relating to a potential economic development agreement for Project Belle (Niagara), terms and conditions of such an agreement, and make recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners, if any."

Economic Development Advisory Board: the meeting

Before the meeting, the word was all over the street that Commissioner Murphy called the meeting to score political points.

EDAB meetings are generally thinly attended. Over time, the EDAB board has become a paper tiger, with membership not much more than a resume builder.



With the word on the street about this meeting, the County's brass showed up in force. Some of these folks are not worried about the pandemic. Back row left to right: Commissioner Robby Hollingsworth, City Councilman Todd Sampson, County Clerk, Jay Swisher. Front row: County Engineer Chad Williams, County Chairman Rocky Ford.

Last Tuesday's meeting was attended by a who's who in Columbia County: County Clerk Jay Swisher, County Engineer Chad Williams, Interim County Manager David Kraus, Assistant County Manager Kevin Kirby, Community Activist Sylvester Warren, County Commissioners Ronald Williams, Robbie Hollingsworth, and Rocky Ford, Assistant City Manager Daniel Sweet, City Councilman Todd Sampson, and Our Santa Fe River's Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson and Kristen Ruben. County-wide water issues were vigorously discussed.



City Manager Joe Helfenberger takes notes.

City Manager Joe Helfenberger, after over two years on the job, claimed to be still clueless about why the Suwannee River Water Management District had cut down the City's ability to pump water.

Mr. Helfenberger said the Water Management District, "Never gave a formal answer. All they gave us was a new permit, so we have a freedom of information request into them for about six different requests for information on this very issue."

The City's new Assistant City Manager, who has no experience with Water and Wastewater, also didn't have any answers during the meeting.

Mr. Helfenberger also mentioned that the Company (Niagara) asked for liquidated damages if the City-County didn't deliver on their promises.

A copy of Niagara's letter to City Attorney Koberlein and County Attorney Foreman did not mention "liquidated damages" as a requirement in a proposed development agreement.

While this was a matter of discussion in earlier meetings, this didn't come up on the December meeting between what was a meeting between the Company's attorneys and the City and County attorneys.

The EDAB meeting went on for an hour and thirty-five minutes before Chairman Murphy brought up Niagara's terms.

There was nothing for the EDAB to review, even though the meeting with Niagara was the week before.

EDAB: 11 minutes dedicated to the project

County Attorney Joel Foreman read the proposed development agreement conditions from his cell phone.

Niagara, after about ten months of going nowhere, was playing hardball. The Company wanted an agreement by January 15.

Chairman Murphy made a brief comment in which he concluded this wasn't enough time, and he didn't know when the City met next.

Mr. Murphy asked, "Do we have a recommendation from the committee?"

There was silence.

Mr. Murphy said he couldn't support it at the committee, and wouldn't support it when it comes before the County 5.

There was still silence.

Finally, County Attorney Foreman mentioned, "The function of the EDAB is to make recommendations."



Charlie Keith, a member of the Suwannee River Water Management Board.

Mr. Foreman did not mention that the Board did not have to make a recommendation due to a lack of supporting material, which he could have easily produced in the week before the meeting.

Suwannee River Water Management District Board member Charlie Keith is also a member of the County's Economic Development Advisory Board.

Mr. Keith recommended the County does not enter into a contract with the Company, and that the County continue to peruse its own water use permit.

Epilogue

Without agreed upon reasons, the Advisory Board unanimously turned down the project.

Now it's up to the infamous Columbia County 5.



Commissioner Ron Williams wears his mask. Photo by Kristin Ruben.

