

# Conversations with Noah Valenstein, E.D., SRWMD in Columbia County 2016-02-04

February 8, 2016

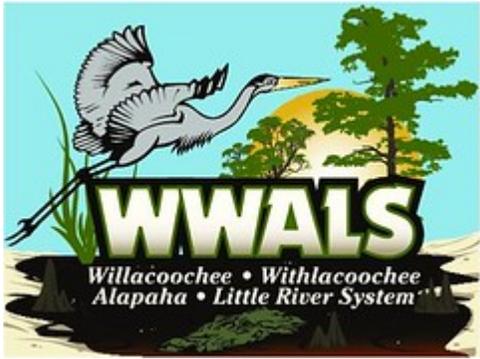


John  
Quarterman



John Quarterman, president of Willacoochee, Withlacoochee, Alapaha and Little River System Coalition (WWALS) comments on the Columbia Co. Board of County Commission meeting which he attended last week, along with OSFR and John Jopling, president of Ichetucknee Alliance. The meeting was in Lake City and was held on February 4, 2016.

\*Your writer has been advised that the reference below to Audubon does not apply to fracking, rather selling and trading conservation lands.



On February 08, 2016 at 11:54AM, jsq at [WWALS Watershed Coalition](#) published the following article:

It's not for shipping water to Jacksonville, it's not much changed from last year, no money is allocated for it yet, and people should get involved in the process, said Noah Valenstein, the new Executive Director of the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD),

in answer to questions from Jim Tatum and Merillee Malwitz-Jipson of Our Santa Fe River (OSFR) and me about the

Falling Creek Aquifer Recharge Project at the Columbia County Commission meeting last Thursday, 4 February 2016.

Plus Sabal Trail, Amtrak and that chicken farm.



Valenstein answered Jim during the Commission meeting.

See also [Jim's report for OSFR](#).

I stayed afterwards and had a longer discussion with Valenstein.

Some notes from memory:

- At the end of the Commission meeting, I invited them all to the pipeline documentary movie in Live Oak this Friday evening. I introduced myself as president of WWALS Watershed Coalition, the Waterkeeper® Alliance Affiliate for the upper Suwannee River, on the path to becoming Suwannee Riverkeeper. I noted that we work closely with Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson and Our Santa Fe River (OSFR).
- I invited the Columbia Commissioners to the hike to the proposed Sabal Trail crossing of the Suwannee River that [the Suwannee County Commissioners agreed to schedule](#). After the meeting, I invited Valenstein. He indicated he had already told whichever Suwannee County Commissioner had

contacted him (he couldn't remember which one) that he and SRWMD staff would go there on their own, due to difficulty of finding enough time while the legislature is in session.

He wondered if there was any urgency.

I said yes, actually, since when

[FERC issues certificates last week](#) it called out that Suwannee River crossing as especially in need of monitoring, and did we want to trust a pipeline company from Houston, Texas to self-monitor?

I also pointed out the Suwannee County hike would have local experts who could point out features SRWMD staff might not be aware of.

Valenstein said they should let him know when and he would try to make it.

- Carlos Herd, who was interim director until Valenstein was appointed, was sitting next to him. I congratulated Herd on passing the baton.
- When Valenstein was asked by OSFR in the meeting and again by me afterwards why it wouldn't be better to limit extraction of water from the aquifer instead of adding schemes like Falling Creek to recharge the aquifer, Valenstein said that it isn't an either/or situation.
- He told me SRWMD is limiting permits, but gradually, not through cutting people off.
- Valenstein volunteered that he believes that Florida law requires him and SRWMD to provide water resources for economic development. When I told him we would have to differ on that he said he understood I had a different opinion, but he believes that's the law, and to change it

the law would have to be changed.

- Stew Liker, Columbia County Observer, 5 February 2016, SRWMD Chief Straight Up With Columbia County Residents & Water Experts,

*Commissioner Nash was still having a little difficulty with the*

*process and your reporter asked Mr. Valenstein this question: "The*

*residents of Florida approved Amendment 1 overwhelmingly, to set*

*aside money to purchase land in perpetuity for the people of*

*Florida. What are your feelings on that and do you think that the*

*state should set aside that land in perpetuity and use that money to*

*purchase the land?"*

*The Executive Director answered, "It was the water and land*

*constitutional amendment. It's limited specifically to land*

*acquisition. The district does have a land acquisition program.*

*We're actively looking for lands to purchase and benefit resource*

*protection in the area."*

- After the meeting Valenstein told me SRWMD has identified general areas where they would be interested in acquiring property if it becomes available. He said this was not for use of eminent domain; just if property comes up for sale. He seemed to indicate such acquisitions would be to further enable projects such as Falling Creek Aquifer Recharge.

I would have thought SRWMD's main goal would be to conserve wetlands.

Perhaps I misheard.

I will inquire.

- I asked him where the \$48 million for the Falling Creek project was coming from. He said there were no identified sources yet, and mentioned some possibilities such as ad valorem taxes.
- He said there would be no vote on approving Falling Creek at the Tuesday morning 9:00 AM SRWMD Board meeting. They were just sending an annual update to the legislature, the 2016 Draft Florida Forever Work Plan Update, in which

Falling Creek was just one proposal, and was basically unchanged since last year.

- When I said I still wondered because of the example of the Flint River Aquifer Storage and Recovery project that Flint Riverkeeper has been fighting off for years, that would ship water to Atlanta,

Valenstein was very quick to say Falling Creek is nothing like that,

because it doesn't use any injection wells, it's just sending water

into the aquifer through existing karst windows.

When I pointed out that somebody could still extract the water later and

ship it,

he said you could say that about any natural recharge, too.

I acknowledged he had a point.

- Valenstein emphasized that the amount of water the Falling Creek Rechargeplan would take from the upper Suwannee River was small compared to theflow of the river during flood.

That's a good point, but it makes me wonder why spend \$48 million

for something that by the same token would have a small effect on the aquifer.

- I brought up wading birds using inundated flood plains and cypress swamps.Valenstein said that should be included in the plan.He said concerned parties should sign up for the process, which includes meetings of stakeholders.

Upcoming for the North Florida Regional Water Supply Partnership

there is this:

*Stakeholder Advisory Committee*

*Feb. 22, 2016, 1 p.m.*

*Florida Gateway College*

*149 S.E. College Place*

*Wilson S. Rivers Library and Media Center*

*Building 200, Room 102*

*Lake City, FL 32025*

- I noted that on the list of NFRWSP stakeholders under environmental Audubon Florida is the only non-academic organization listed.

I stated they do not represent WWALS.

He said they had to limit the formal listings to just a few organizations,

but anybody who comes to the meetings is a stakeholder and is listed as

participating.

That last part is good, but I don't find the first part acceptable.

Remember,

Audubon Florida not only refused to help WWALS in fighting a permit for Sabal Trail from DEP,

they actually sent a letter to FERC in support of Sabal Trail.

And more recently they [told their members to stop contacting the legislature about fracking.](#)

WWALS is a member of Floridians against fracking.

- Valenstein was aware of the recent large agricultural land purchase by Bill Gates and said he approved of them. He was not aware that Gates is using chicken manure as fertilizer. I told him I would get him pictures.
- Valenstein emphasized both in the meeting and to me afterwards that people should call him up and ask him about things. While obviously I don't agree with him on everything, I would like to commend him on making that offer, and on responding to all questions that were asked him at (and after)

the Columbia County meeting.

You can see that the local newspaper reporter similarly complimented him.

After we were the only two people still standing outside the building later,

I told Valenstein I would send him email and call him.

- His card says:

*Noah Valenstein*

*Executive Director*

*Phone: 386-362-1001*

*Cell: 850-251-2116*

*website: Mysuwanneeriver.com*

*FL Toll Free: 800-226-1066*

*Fax: 386-362-1056*

*E-mail: NDV@srwmd.org*

*Suwannee River Water Management District*

*9225 CR 49*

*Live Oak, FL 32060*

Other topics brought up at that Columbia BOCC meeting included requesting revived Amtrak service, and

the notorious chicken farm (especially by Sheila Brigham and Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson).

Probably more on those later.

Meanwhile, [as OSFR points out](#):

*The big news directed at our efforts for the evening was the announcement that Mr. Valenstein has arranged a stakeholder and agency Best Management Plan (BMP) meeting for the end of this month to discuss nutrient loading in high recharge of the Floridan aquifer. This is a meeting that stemmed from the chicken factory issues. The county is holding off our AG-3 zoning workshop until this meeting or more like them take place.*

More on that when that meeting is scheduled.

-jsq

You can join this fun and work by [becoming a WWALS member today!](#)

Read this article at [WWALS Watershed Coalition](#) at <http://www.wwals.net/2016/02/08/conversations-with-noah-valenstein-in-e-d-srwmd-in-columbia-county-2016-02-04/>.

Posted via [IFTTT](#)