

OSFR's Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson cited in Sun Editorial

September 25, 2019



OSFR board member Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson and OSFR advisor Dr. Robert Knight are both cited in today's Gainesville Sun editorial as environmental candidates for the Suwannee River Water Management District's governing board.

It has been in the news lately that DeSantis has failed to fill water board seats in various districts, causing scheduled meetings to be postponed for a lack of quorum.

Several environmental groups and individuals have written letters to the governor supporting Malwitz-Jipson as a candidate. Most water boards are notoriously lacking environmentalists while very heavy on representatives of agriculture, developers, construction and business.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

Appointees key to protecting environment

The Gainesville Sun editorial board
September 25, 2019

Earlier this month, the Suwannee River Water Management District's governing board was forced to cancel a budget hearing because it had too many vacancies.

Gov. Ron DeSantis subsequently reappointed two members so the board could again have a quorum – but DeSantis needs to do better in selecting the people being appointed and in the speed of those appointments. The reappointed members are the president of a Perry logging company and a Lake City pawn shop, keeping the board filled with representatives of agricultural and business interests.

While the issue might not capture the public's attention, such appointments are a hugely important part of a governor's job. Florida's water management districts play a key role in protecting the environment and water resources, with power over issuing permits allowing groundwater pumping and the destruction of wetlands.

Florida Springs Council President Dan Hilliard wrote DeSantis this week urging him to “restore diversity and balance” to the district boards, particularly those responsible for protecting Florida's springs.

“There are a dozen qualified applicants who are supported by the environmental community and not influenced by vested business or political interest,” Hilliard wrote.

DeSantis showed he cares more about environmental protection

than his predecessor when he began his term in January, with one of his first acts being to demand the resignations of members of the South Florida Water Management District board. The district had been too closely aligned with Big Sugar, impeding efforts to protect the public from toxic algae blooms caused by industry practices.

That board now has eight of its nine members in place, but the Tampa Bay Times reported this week that Florida's other four water management district boards have multiple open seats. DeSantis' communications director, Helen Aguirre Ferré, told the Times that the governor is just being selective.

"When it comes to water management, he wants to make sure his appointments are people who share his vision for Florida's environment," she said.

Some of his appointments, however, seem to continue the approach of former Gov. Rick Scott – who when his term ended left the district boards filled with agricultural and business representatives but no one focused on environmental protection. DeSantis last month named the president of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce to the board of the St. Johns River Water Management District, one of two districts that includes parts of Alachua County.

With the Suwannee River district board, the other district that includes the county, DeSantis has a chance to appoint environmental advocates with applicants including Florida Springs Institute Executive Director Bob Knight and Our Santa Fe River Inc. board member Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson. Previous boards had members such as former state lawmaker David Flagg, whose votes included rejecting a permit for a water-bottling operation in Gilchrist County.

With a nearby permit for a water bottling now being sought by

Nestlé/Seven Springs, the composition of that board is particularly important. DeSantis needs to show through his remaining appointments that he has the vision to better protect Florida's environment, not allow it to be further degraded.
