

## **GUEST COMMENTARY**

**February, 2007**

By Mick Denham, (Current City of Sanibel Mayor, but was Vice Mayor at the time this was presented)

### **New Regional Committee to Take On Water Quality Issue**

As most of you are aware, the Sanibel City Council, together with a number of other governmental and citizen organizations, has been waging a fight to prevent or reduce polluted water releases from Lake Okeechobee down the Caloosahatchee and into our estuary. These releases have been seen to result in the death of sea grasses; more and bigger harmful algae blooms; and a serious, often fatal, threat to aquatic and other wildlife. The most extensive bloom of red drift algae ever recorded recently hit the beaches of Sanibel Island and Fort Myers Beach, impacting the tourist season, recreation, commercial fishing and the way of life for local residents.

However, our beaches and estuaries face threats separate from the Okeechobee releases. They are also vulnerable to polluted runoff from the Caloosahatchee basin itself and other area watersheds, due to urban development, aging water management systems, agricultural use of land, and loss of native habitat. Instead of natural cleansing of storm water runoff, we have seen our water quality slowly degrade, in natural as well as altered rivers, creeks, estuaries, and marine waters within the region.

There is a move underway to reduce the impact of these additional threats. As a voting member of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, I have been asked to chair a new committee, the Lower West Coast Watersheds Subcommittee. Composed of county commissioners and city officials from Sarasota, Charlotte, Lee, Collier and Glades counties, the committee over the next few months will focus on a number of parallel threats to our waterways. The four major topics we will address are:

- storm water runoff
- sewage treatment
- fertilizer application and
- regional drainage systems.

The committee's mandate is to submit to the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council a series of resolutions addressing current control standards and criteria used in assessing regional impact, and recommending new standards that will ultimately improve water quality throughout the region.

If approved by the Planning Council, such resolutions should provide governing bodies throughout the region with a basis for discussion and development of new water quality strategies. The goal is to begin a process to change the dynamics of water quality control and reduce pollution in our regional waterways. By forming a regional alliance to identify and then

implement solutions, we can involve more people in areas where they can truly make a difference.

*Meetings are held at the office of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, 1926 Victoria Avenue, Fort Myers. For information call 239/338-2550.*