

Editorial: True conservation

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Saving Florida's springs will require the state to protect and restore the land around them.

If we don't stop polluting and putting wells on that land, there is little hope that our springs will rebound to their formerly pristine states.

Amendment 1 mandates that 33 percent of revenue from a state tax on real-estate transactions be spent on land and water conservation. It is expected to provide about \$757 million for that purpose in the upcoming budget.

Predictably, some in Tallahassee want the funds to pay for infrastructure projects that in some cases would further diminish water quality and quantity.

By passing Amendment 1 by a 75 percent margin in November, voters sent a clear message that they want the Legislature to spend more on conservation. Lawmakers shouldn't use the money to replace other funding for environmental programs, or as an excuse to cut other programs funded by the real-estate tax.

Recently, Sen. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness, filed bills that would designate a trust fund to handle Amendment 1 money. Hopefully this is the start of establishing a process in which the money is distributed to worthy conservation projects, rather than pork projects for powerful lawmakers.

Unfortunately, lawmakers are already making lists of earmarks for possible Amendment 1 funding. This raises the potential the money will be spent on

upgrading municipal wastewater systems and switching people on septic tanks to those systems.

While those projects would help water quality in some cases, Amendment 1 shouldn't foot the bill. The amendment language mentions land in 13 instances but never mentions septic tanks or wastewater systems. Moreover, members of the coalition behind the amendment have made clear their position that the money's main purpose is land conservation.

Business groups that opposed the amendment are now trying to hijack it. Associated Industries of Florida has suggested the money be spent on water supply projects that facilitate growth.

True conservation requires protecting the water supply rather than seeking new ways to exploit it. Similarly, using Amendment 1 to put rural septic tank owners on wastewater systems might only fuel sprawl that harms water quality and quantity.

Lawmakers should establish a competitive process in which projects receive Amendment 1 money based on scientific criteria. The Florida Forever land conservation program awarded money through such a process before its funding dwindled to nothing.

Protecting the aquifer will require tough policies such as statewide, mandatory water conservation measures and stricter controls on pollution. In the absence of political will for such steps, lawmakers must at least protect and restore land that has the biggest impact on our water supply and springs.

If lawmakers can't even use Amendment 1 for its intended purpose, there is little hope they'll be able to save our springs.