

Opinion

Guest column: Jacksonville's water will always be local

By Paul Steinbrecher

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In the past few weeks there has been some confusion and questions in regard to JEA and the water it provides.

While dry land can be bought and sold, water is treated differently in Florida. The fact is, JEA doesn't own the water, the state of Florida does. JEA has a permit to withdraw and use water within its defined (and local) service territory.

To suggest that selling JEA means our community loses control of its water is incorrect. Let me explain.

Nicknamed the "Sunshine State," Florida could just as easily be called the "Water State." With 7,800 freshwater lakes, 1,700 streams and rivers, 700 springs, 11 million acres of wetlands and five major aquifer systems, water is central to our way of life.

Back in 1972, Florida did away with traditional "water rights." Unlike many other states, Florida's waters are owned by the state and cannot be bought, sold or owned by any individual entity.

The state instead has a permitting system administrated by five regional water management districts that regulate the uses of water, and who and how much water can be withdrawn via Consumptive Use Permits. The criteria to obtain a permit states that the proposed use must be a reasonable-beneficial use, not interfere with existing legal uses and be consistent with the public interest.

This permit can be transferred between owners, but the law remains the same. The permit holder must legally comply with the terms of the permit, including continuing to serve the community's defined service territory and protecting the environment.

JEA obtained its Consumptive Use Permits from the St. Johns River Water Management District for a service territory that includes most of Duval County and portions of the three adjoining counties of Nassau, Clay and St. Johns.

JEA's permit only grants it the right to withdraw water to meet the needs of this service territory. It does not authorize the transportation and sale of water outside the service territory.

This means that no matter the outcome of JEA's Invitation to Negotiate for Strategic Alternatives — or if the voters approve a sale — the current Consumptive Use Permits will still limit the use of water to the permitted service territory and the same laws and regulations will apply.

With all that's going on, it's important that we don't forget that the continuing availability of clean and plentiful water will have an effect on the future quality of life in Duval County and throughout JEA's service territory.

Although we are surrounded by water, Florida's drinking water resources are actually limited and facing increasing pressure as our state grows.

JEA works hard to help our customers learn how to conserve our most precious resource, the Floridan aquifer, so that we may continue to benefit from it for generations to come.

We're committed to driving these ideals now and in the future.

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