

GUEST ESSAY

For the sake of accountability, abolish Water Authority

It has been months since the state comptroller issued his report on the unjustified compensation given former Monroe County Water Authority Director John Stanwix and nothing of substance has happened.

Since that time, Republican leadership has circled the wagons in an attempt to shelter the former Monroe County Republican Party chairman, and their own political futures, from scrutiny.

They voted down legislation I sponsored that called for an investigation into the actions of the Water Authority, the resignation of the responsible board members and the reorganization of the board to comply with the intent of state law. The lack of action despite public outcry is due to the simple fact that no elected official is directly responsible for the Water Authority board.

Abolishing the authority changes that.

Abolishing the Water Authority changes one fundamental thing – it makes the county executive, rather than an appointed board, responsible for water service in this county.

Currently, the authority board is appointed by the president of the Legislature, who is in turn elected by the majority party of the County Legislature. By abolishing the authority the voters of Monroe County get a say in how their money is spent and can speak loudly at the ballot box if they are being treated unfairly. By making water service part of the Environmental Services Department, we end the backroom deals and restore accountability.

The public has been told that we should be content that the Water Authority hired counsel itself with the stated intent of investigating ways to recoup some of the unearned compensation. Make no mistake, this is not in any way an independent counsel, but rather the Water Authority's counsel whose only obligation is to the authority board, not to the ratepayers, and definitely not to the people of Monroe County.

The County Legislature has asked for a copy of the report issued by the counsel to the



By Travis Heider

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authority board and has been told that it is in the best interest of the authority not to release it. With no repercussions or public accountability, why should they?

We have also been told that because the County Legislature has passed a measure limiting future board members to salary-only positions, the problem is solved, and the case is closed.

But the problem cannot be solved if nothing of substance has happened. All of the past and present board members will retain their benefits and will continue to receive them well into retirement.

The board will continue to operate under the two-party rule of ideological confederates – Republicans and Conservatives. And most importantly, the authority has no obligation to establish a timeline or criteria for reporting anything to anyone, nor is anyone obligated to return any of the unearned compensation.

With the case closed, the ratepayers of Monroe County will remain out \$1.1 million, the board members that approved the unearned pay will still have their jobs, and John Stanwix will continue enjoying sunny Florida on Monroe County's dime.

The people of Monroe County simply can not afford to have this scandal drag on endlessly. If the county government is to continue to function with any legitimacy, than individual Republican legislators need to break from their leadership and side with the ratepayers in Monroe County.

I urge each legislator, as well as the county executive, to rethink their position and join the Democratic Caucus in support of the abolishment of the authority. At some point we need to say enough is enough and take action to permanently end the problems.

That point is now.