

EDITORIAL OPINION

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Editorial

Utility system deal a plus for Golden Gate

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To say this latest water utility acquisition is going more smoothly than the last one might be one of the understatements of the year.

Collier County government's excellent water and sewer utility is making substantial progress in less than four months toward acquiring the Golden Gate service now provided by the Florida Governmental Utility Authority (FGUA).

Contrast that quick movement with county government's embattled acquisition completed earlier this year of the Orange Tree Utility Co. system. That process started with an agreement in 1991 for eventual county acquisition; in March 2013 commissioners notified Orange Tree of takeover plans but legal entanglements ensued. As of March 1, the county utility finally took over the former Orange Tree system serving the burgeoning area between North Naples and Ave Maria.

Now comes the potential FGUA acquisition.

It's "the most important thing this commission can do for this area," Commissioner Burt Saunders said, alluding to the densely populated Golden Gate community in his district.

While Saunders has publicly thanked county administrative staff members for their diligence in moving the promising deal expeditiously forward, that's a humble gesture on his part. Saunders made the FGUA acquisition one of his campaign priorities in winning the commission seat in November and deserves kudos for pressing to deliver on his promise successfully. It was at Saunders' urging in March that commissioners agreed to pursue this deal and hired a consultant to determine if it's feasible.

County Manager Leo Ochs told commissioners the FGUA is receptive to turning the system over to the county utility. The FGUA, formed in 1999 by Lee and three other counties, today manages 80-plus utility systems serving 100,000 customers in 14 counties.

Why so important?

For those who are FGUA customers, the benefits of the deal clearly come down to dollars and sense.

According to a county analysis, the 3,700 water customers and 2,300 sewer system customers now generate bill payments totaling about \$7.8 million to FGUA. However, by bringing those customers' rates into alignment with the county's lower charges, they'll be paying a total of \$2.1 million less in utility bills. The analysis further breaks that down to say a Golden Gate customer using 5,000 gallons of water monthly would save \$39.27 monthly when transitioned to the county utility, which has rates that are 30.2 percent lower.

In addition, Golden Gate customers' new provider would be a county utility system that repeatedly has excelled in water tasting competitions.

Yet the importance of this agreement goes deeper — literally underground — and it extends beyond Golden Gate and FGUA's service area.

According to county records, some 10,000 folks aren't far from a public health risk because the Golden Gate area has neighborhood water wells interspersed with septic tanks.

Also, the extension of water service could provide fire hydrants to serve 25,000 or so residents in what utilities administrator George Yilmaz said could be a five- to 10-year installation program.

Benefits extend beyond the immediate Golden Gate area. Yilmaz noted Collier's environment at large stands to benefit through a systematic future replacement of septic tanks that are near Golden Gate's plentiful canals.

For those who some day would need to hook up to the system, Saunders suggested this could be less expensive than the cost of eventually having to replace a household system.

Not yet a done deal

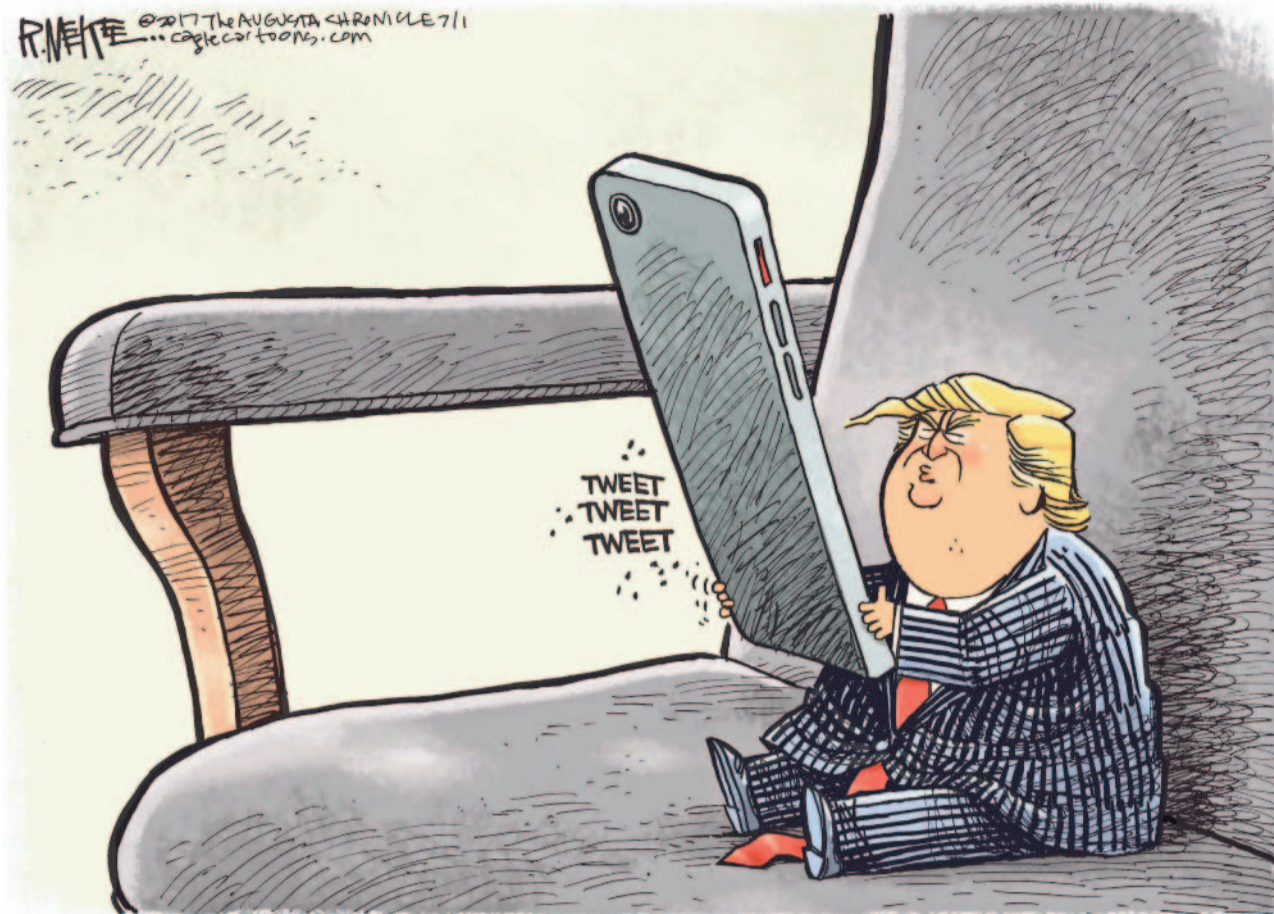
While the deal isn't completed, the commission's unanimous vote last week authorized staff to negotiate the terms of a deal with FGUA.

Unlike the Orange Tree system where consultants raised questions about what infrastructure problems the county utility might be acquiring, Ochs told commissioners the FGUA plants appear to be in good shape.

"This is one we can hit the ground running on," he said.

The analysis states there's \$2.8 million of bond debt and \$38.6 million of loans the county would assume. However, a financial consultant opined it wouldn't affect county bond ratings.

The unexpected can always arise, but for now we're encouraged to see this deal progressing about 15 years faster than the last one did.



Letters

Obama an economic failure

Mukhtar Ali writes in on June 29 praising former President Barack Obama's reduction in the rate of debt growth for at least the third time since I began reading the Naples Daily News about six months ago.

I assume by implication he means Obama was a good steward of our national debt and therefore the economy. He wasn't. Two primary points. First, he uses 2009 as his baseline year. News flash Ali, Obama was elected in 2008 and took office in 2009. The annual deficit went from \$458 billion in 2008 to \$1.413 trillion in 2009. This was in large part due to Obama's failed stimulus plan.

Remember shovel-ready jobs? Not so much. Even Obama smirked about how wrong they were after his re-election when he couldn't be held accountable again. By using 2009 as your starting point, you can correctly say that annual deficits did go down in later years, but it is a meaningless and misleading point.

In all but one year (2008), the lowest of Obama's annual deficits were higher than every year of George W. Bush's presidency and then only slightly. What matters to the economy over time is the absolute level of the national debt and we all (maybe not you, Ali, because you are not really paying attention) know how that went.

Your second point is to bring up the deficits under former President Ronald Reagan. You are correct, but the difference is Reagan's deficits led to spectacular economic growth and job creation. Obama's deficits gave us a doubling of the debt, a gravely weakened armed forces, sluggish economic growth and more able-bodied working aged people out of the work force.

Dale Griffin, Naples

Beware telephone scam

Three times in the past week, I have received a scam telephone call from the same person. I recognize his voice, starting with, "Hi, Grandpa."

First, I am not a parent. Second, I have no grandchildren. Third, I have the caller ID feature on my telephone and the incoming number shows as "Caller Unknown" followed by just a series of zeros.

If you ever receive such a call where the person tries to identify himself, from clues you might inadvertently give, as a relative or person you know, hang up immediately. Volunteer no information. From anything you say, they will attempt to weave a hard-luck story where your alleged grandchild or friend is in dire distress and needs money.

Again, say nothing. On the third call, I admit to accusing the caller of being a repeat scammer doing a disgraceful, ugly thing, made more horrendous since focusing on elderly or possibly gullible people.

Be careful and never give personal information over the phone

John Boettjer, North Naples

Report domestic violence

Watching Cape Coral Mayor Marni Sawicki's very public struggle with alleged domestic violence is a testament to the fact that anyone can be a victim of abuse, regardless of age, race and socioeconomic class. Each minute in the United States, nearly 20 people are physically abused by an intimate partner. That's more than 10 million women and men a year.

Most of their stories will never be told and once the violence comes to light, the typical response will be, "Why did they stay?" Domestic violence doesn't typically happen overnight; it reveals itself over time. Likewise, leaving a volatile relationship is also a process for victims to get out safely. Violence typically escalates when a victim attempts to end the relationship.

Last year in Collier County, five members of our community were murdered by their abusers. They were your friends, your colleagues, your neighbors. These crimes and the hundreds more that go unreported, should not define us, but bring us together.

Instead of asking, "Why does she stay?" we should ask, "Why does he batter?" or, on a larger scale, "Why does society allow battering to continue?" We

must change our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors regarding the acceptance of violence in our society.

We applaud Sawicki's courage to stand up, speak out and seek help. If we cannot end violence in our homes, we will never end violence in our community. If you know someone in need of help, call the Shelter for Abused Women & Children 24-hour crisis hotline at 239-775-1101.

Linda Oberhaus, Naples

Group benefits schools

I read with great consternation Keith Flaugh's so-called "rebuttal" to the wonderful opinion piece written by Beth Povlow in the June 12th Naples Daily News commentary. As a member/supporter of The Coalition for Quality Public Education (C4QPE), I know firsthand of the "non-partisan" commitment of this group's activities on behalf of our public schools.

In addition, C4QPE is very careful to support just issues, not candidates. For me as a resident, a voter, a retired educator, I am thankful C4QPE exists. This group provides a vital service to our great Collier County Public School District and its residents. Flaugh and his "little band" does little else but feed discord. Most people are sick and tired of the hyper-partisanship. Thanks again to Povlow and the C4QPE for all that you are doing.

Norine Hemping, Naples

Minimum wage costly

While most Americans celebrate the holiday weekend, employees and small businesses in Seattle have less to be excited about.

According to a new University of Washington study, the city's experiment with a \$13 minimum wage has reduced opportunities for employees in the city. Instead of boosting pay, affected employees on average brought home \$125 less per month, as the higher hourly pay was offset by a loss in hours.

The stories back up the statistics. For instance, small business owners Heidi and Karam Mann were forced to lay off more than half the staff at their Subway franchise, when the entire cost of the wage hike couldn't be passed off through higher prices. (Their story and others can be found on Facebook15.com.)

States and cities considering whether to follow Seattle's lead on wage mandates should let economic reality rather than rhetoric guide their decisions.

Michael Saltsman, managing director, Employment Policies Institute, Washington, D.C.

Call to civility

Kudos to you, Ron Kezeske, chairman of the County Republican Executive Committee, for your clarion call that we all get back to communicating with one another with civility. As a community leader and an elected official, though not a Republican, I praise you for taking such action.

Taking this one step further, as Americans all, we have work to do. And wouldn't it be nice if we all worked together for the better good. We might even accomplish something we all would be proud of.

Few, if anyone, disputes that we who live in such a great land can and must provide the best educational experiences for all our children. Our Collier County Public Schools, for example, are now rated fifth in the state. What a great accomplishment, lets now build on that to make them even better.

We all want and need good, affordable healthcare. It is a shame, but only by working together can we cover the most needy, provide access to all, while at the same time addressing costs across the whole system.

We all care deeply about our homes, family and future generations. Therefore, talking together about how to fiscally grow our economy while protecting our piece of Mother Earth is vital. We don't have to choose one over the other if we work together.

Again, thanks. I will do my part to work together for the betterment of our community and do so in a civil manner.

Steve Hemping, Naples