

March 21, 2006  
Report on National League of Cities Meeting  
From Carla Brooks Johnston

The value of this meeting can be summarized in three areas: 1) specific workshops, 2) information from some keynote presentations, 3) networking with other elected officials.

#### **Lake O and Federal Role**

One particular objective I had was to learn anything that could be useful to us in the difficult matter of limiting Lake Okeechobee releases into the Caloosahatchee.

Part of the solution to this problem is in securing the passage and funding of WRDA (Water Resources Development Act) which includes projects across the nation—but also some specific elements of the Everglades Restoration. The bill passed in the House last year. It is now waiting in the Senate for floor debate and vote. At present there are 80 (of 100) members of the US Senate who are sponsors of the legislation, but Senator Bill Frist (R-Tennessee) is preventing it from reaching the floor. It's sat on his desk for over two months now. I spoke with Catherine Ransom, committee staffer for Senator Jeffords (I-Vermont) pertaining to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. The message was that, given the stalemate, the best hope for WRDA is that President Bush has requested new powers for the Army Corps because of the problems of New Orleans post-Katrina clean-up. Apparently it's the first time in many many years that an increase in ACE powers has been requested. Ransom indicated that if it is decided that the ACE issue has priority and Senate leadership decides legislation should happen within WRDA, WRDA might actually come for a vote. Or, the Senate could deal with the ACE separately. There's certainly a separate question of what added powers might be and what the effect of that might be for SW Florida.

Michael Chernoff, Secretary for Homeland Security also mentioned the role for increased Army Corp participation in natural disasters. No specifics.

The other half of the DC water issue is money. Jim Hanlon, a former Acting Deputy Administrator for the EPA Office of Water and presently Director of EPA Wastewater Management spoke about the FY '07 budget requests which the President has given to Congress. Clean water dollar requests are way down--\$1.3 billion in FY '01 and in FY'07 \$687 million. Senator George Voinovich (R-Ohio) spoke on President Bush's FY '07 Budget requests and noted that there is a \$1 Billion + backlog on funding for current Army Corp civil works projects and expressed some concern about the wisdom of jeopardizing national infrastructure.

FYI, in the House, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment has exclusive jurisdiction over Clean Water Act and the Army Corp projects. Connie Mack (R-FL14th) is on this committee.

I'm providing each Council member with the most recent *Congressional Directory* should you know any snow-birds who may be active voters and campaign contributors in states represented by key Congressional leadership or key Committee members. The most effective grassroots lobbying is when voters contact their own elected officials to urge passage of particular legislation such as WRDA. If we are using a multi-faceted approach to solving the water issue, this is one avenue—and, when it works, can be very helpful. The obstacles are, nonetheless, enormous.

#### **Lake O and Broadening Constituencies Seeking Relief**

On another note, Mayor Bob Benton from Ft. Pierce, Florida is in the fishing business and is very eager to see a coalition of fishing interest from East and West Coasts as well as from the Lake O area come together to address the problems caused by ACE-SFWMD lake management policies. I have his contact information. Mayor Kevin Burns of North Miami has some concerns about water adjustment in the canals that dump to the ocean. He says he does not have any impact from St. Lucie.

#### **Bird Flu Pandemic Preparations**

Numerous other national priority issues were addressed. One very small reference was made to bird flu. I think it worth noting because I think it emphasizes the importance of local communities figuring out how to protect our citizenry if, or when, a pandemic strikes.

Michael Chernoff, Secretary of Homeland Security, focused mostly on the the new push to address illegal immigrants and on Katrina--the 'lessons learned' pertaining to having appropriate communications in a disaster and pertaining to the need for better organized data on refugee destinations. His comment about bird flu was that the US Department of Agriculture has a protocol for handling infected animals and that first responders will need to collaborate closely with public health officials.

Considerable discussion took place about the range of cuts to Homeland Security recommended in the FY'07 Budget including cuts in First Responder and Law Enforcement funds.