

Response to Orlando Sentinel

Recent commentaries in the Orlando Sentinel by staff writers Daphne Sashin and Mike Thomas concerning the problem of nitrate and phosphate pollution in the Wekiva Springs area have stimulated renewed concern toward this very important issue. The Markham Woods Association, a civic organization representing approximately 2,900 homeowners along the Markham Woods Road corridor, is also interested in protecting and maintaining Wekiva environmental quality. Indeed, the natural beauty of the Wekiva Springs area was a big factor in attracting most of us to live here.

We specifically share in the consensus opinion expressed by Ms. Sashin and Mr. Thomas that excessive commercial and residential overuse of fertilizers has negatively impacted existing groundwater, streams, and rivers. The Markham Woods Association welcomes regulatory action to reduce the use of fertilizers in our area and possibly eliminate harsh, concentrated chemical fertilizers in favor of more environmentally friendly organic fertilizers.

However, claims by the Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Environmental Protection that area onsite septic systems are the next-largest contributor of nitrates to the Wekiva waters remains very unclear. All the initial scientific field studies completed in the past year have shown that nitrogen and phosphorus pollution reaching the Wekiva River cannot be conclusively attributed to area onsite septic systems. A comprehensive, long-term, field study has been mandated by the Florida legislature under Line Item 1682 of the new budget. This study will start this year and hopefully resolve this septic drainfield issue. We believe it is not prudent for DOH to enact new rules concerning residential septic tank systems until this study is finished. Proposed DOH rules would force some homeowners to spend between \$15,000 to \$30,000 in new performance-based onsite septic systems plus an estimated \$1,000 in annual maintenance expenses. It does not make sense to require these more expensive systems when such equipment may prove not to be warranted.

We are not alone with our feelings on this matter. The Department of Health's two advisory committees - the Research Review and Advisory Committee (RRAC) and the Technical Review and Advisory Panel (TRAP) - both have concluded that further scientific study is needed regarding residential septic systems and have recently voted that DOH not move forward with their proposed new rules.

In the meantime, we agree it is important to move forward in addressing the biggest negative factor affecting the Wekiva Springs area, namely the high use of private and commercial fertilizers. We support government and/or private initiatives addressing the fertilizer issue, but we strongly ask regulators to hold off on any new septic rules until the newly funded studies are done.