

THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY

IN BALANCE

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE GUARDIANS OF MARTIN COUNTY



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Live Responsibly, Protect Our Future

EMAIL

info@theguardiansofmartincounty.com

VISIT ONLINE

theguardiansofmartincounty.com

WRITE

The Guardians of Martin County
P.O. Box 1489
Hobe Sound, FL 33475

CALL

772-546-7480



SFWMD, Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades Agricultural Area

New Hope for Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir: Florida Crystals Lease Ends Early

The sugar grower Florida Crystals agreed in the beginning of October to the early end of a controversial lease on land south of Lake Okeechobee that is planned for a stormwater-treatment area (STA) linked to the new EAA reservoir.

An extension of the lease (last November) by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) in the EAA resulted in a bold move by Gov. Ron DeSantis to call for members of the SFWMD board to resign. This was one of his first actions after being inaugurated in January 2019.

The nearly \$1 million-a-year lease, which was challenged by environmental groups, allowed Florida Crystals to continue farming on about 16,000 acres planned for the project and was posted on a meeting agenda the night before it was approved.

With the end of the lease, the SFWMD can now advance the construction schedule on the EAA reservoir. The reservoir is aimed at helping reduce discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers, which have led to

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Natural Power Never Shined So Brightly

On a hot August summer day, The Guardians went on a field trip to visit two FPL Solar Power Plants to learn about the company's "30 by 30" plan. FPL's goal is to install 30 million solar power panels by 2030, making Florida a world leader in solar energy. At that time, more energy will be generated from the sun than from power plants fueled by coal and oil.



From L to R: GMC Board Members Merrill Snyder, George MacLean, Media Producer Sally Heims, Executive Director Greg Braun

We visited Loggerhead Solar Energy Center in St. Lucie County, one of 18 solar centers in the State, with 330,000 solar panels housed on 565 acres. FPL says this is enough energy to power about 15,000 homes with an emissions reduction equivalent to removing 12,600 of our cars from the road every year.

Nearby in Indiantown, FPL's Sweetbay Solar Energy Center is under construction with a completion date expected in early 2020. Sweetbay is one of 10 new solar plants that FPL says will create about 2,000 jobs during peak construction.

The solar energy centers are quiet, do not require water for operation, and reduce air pollution. We also learned that FPL partners with Audubon Florida to help promote pollinators and preserve wildlife habitat at Loggerhead and other solar plants. For more information:

<https://bit.ly/2MhjPCa> ■

Algae Bloom: "Managing" Water Brings Relief

For the first time in several years, this past summer went by without major algae outbreaks. What's different this year? A change in the way water levels are managed in Lake Okeechobee. Since levels were kept lower during season, major discharges were avoided during the wettest months. We applaud Congressman Brian Mast, Florida Oceanographic Society's Mark Perry, SFWMD, and the Army Corps of Engineers for supporting this change in strategy.

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION (CDC) STUDIES ALGAE VAPORS

With the summers getting warmer, algae bloom outbreaks around the

Country are still an issue. The CDC has targeted Florida to study 50 people who have been highly exposed to breathing in the vapors caused by algae blooms. The study will test the levels of cyanobacteria in the systems of people who live and work near Lake Okeechobee.

During the summers of 2016 and 2018, Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries were choked with blue-green algae blooms so thick and smelly, it temporarily shut down businesses, disrupted tourism, and sickened dogs that drank that water.

For more information:

<https://www.cdc.gov/habs/> ■

Dorian: Near Miss Brings Out the Best

The Treasure Coast dodged a bullet when Hurricane Dorian made landfall in the Bahamas, leaving thousands without power, running water, and damage similar to a war zone.

Yet Martin County led the way in its efforts to help the victims. With the help of the community, the non-profit, "Operation 300" organized and collected well over 1.5 million pounds of relief items from hangar 3 at Witham Field and transported them to the Islands through October 4th. Volunteers also helped restore several churches and homes.

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Facebook, Operation 300



Facebook, Operation 300, Volunteers, Stuart Airport

VIRGIN TRAINS (BRIGHTLINE) UPDATE



WILL THE SECOND TIME BE THE CHARM FOR LEGISLATION?

Senator Debbie Mayfield will once again pursue more state oversight of passenger rail service in the upcoming legislative session. Sen. Mayfield told us the legislation will address a gap in regulation between Federal and State agencies on passenger rail. Since Virgin Trains (formerly Brightline) began service in 2018, more than two dozen people have been killed.

An independent study on high-speed rail from the State Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (the OPPAGA report) found that Florida had a higher rate of fatalities on railroads than any other State. The report noted the State Department of Transportation hasn't used its authority to regulate rail service at the train's expected speeds of between 81 mph and 125 mph. Sen. Mayfield's legislation will call for fencing in areas where there is public activity (such as schools and playgrounds

nearby) and sealed corridors for the at-grade crossings. Look for our interviews with Sen. Mayfield and the key players calling for tougher regulations in the coming weeks.

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY KEEPING UP THE FIGHT

On September 24th, Indian River County (IRC) presented oral arguments before the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, asking the court to reverse a lower courts findings challenging the legality of the Private Activity Bonds (PABs) allocated to Virgin Trains. Also on appeal is the lower courts findings that the Federal Railroad Administration followed the proper analysis of safety with regard to the noise and vibration the higher speed rail will pose to the community. IRC Attorney Dylan Reingold tells us he does not have a timetable on when a decision is expected. IRC also has a lawsuit against the State over the cost and maintenance of the railroad crossings, estimated to be more than

\$8 million dollars through 2030, to handle the increased rail traffic and upgrades Virgin Trains will bring.

NEW STATIONS FOR VIRGIN TRAINS

With ridership and revenue below expectations, Virgin Trains' original business model with four stations in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, West Palm and Orlando is changing dramatically. Negotiations are underway for stations in Aventura, Boca Raton and PortMiami. There's also talk of a station in Disney World.

There will be a station on the Treasure Coast as part of the lawsuit settlement agreement with Martin County and Care FL, but that will be five years after the West Palm to Orlando route it complete. No word on how these additional stops will impact the original selling point of getting from Miami to Orlando in 3 hours or how it will affect competition for the lower priced Tri-Rail commuter service. Stay up to date at <https://www.citizensagainstthetrain.com>

Big Victory for Martin County Residents

On September 24th, The Governor and Cabinet unanimously rejected Harmony Ranch's Petition for the creation of a Community Development District (CDD) in rural Hobe Sound. The Guardians joined with citizens, citizen groups, Jupiter Island and all the other municipalities in Martin County to voice their opposition to the project. The shared concern was that

the approval of the CDD petition would increase the likelihood that Harmony would develop the property at a higher density than what is currently permitted by the Martin County Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. Thank you to everyone who participated in this collaborative effort! ■

New Hope for EAA Reservoir

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major problems with toxic algae.

In September, the Governor said he would seek \$625 million in recurring funding for three years for Everglades restoration and protection of Florida's water resources. ■

Thank you, Maggy.

Guardians' Board Advisor Maggy Hurchalla's fight for her right to free speech continues.

In September, the New York Times featured a long article highlighting her life-long exemplary service to Martin County. In the story, the NYTimes had this to say about Mrs. Hurchalla:

"She is one of the few remaining voices of a generation that remembers hurricanes before they had names, the last surviving child of a mother who built the family homestead by hand. Her life has spanned much of the state's modern history, a story of growth inextricable from development".

In addition to the NYTimes article, Mrs. Hurchalla has received letters of support from all over the world -- including activists in Australia, France,

and Switzerland as well as throughout Florida and the United States.

Mrs. Hurchalla was sued by Lake Point Restoration in 2013, accused of encouraging Martin County Commissioners to back out of a deal that was supposed to create a rock mining project that would ultimately benefit the environment by cleaning water and sending it to the Everglades or the Loxahatchee River. She questioned whether it would destroy wetlands and said that she was exercising her First Amendment rights in communicating with her elected representatives about the project.

Earlier this year the Fourth District



Court of Appeal upheld a \$4.4 million verdict and Mrs. Hurchalla asked for a hearing before the full Fourth District Court of Appeal. The court denied her request. Mrs. Hurchalla's attorneys are now asking the Florida Supreme Court to hear the case. Many organizations have filed "friend of the court" briefs in support, including The Guardians of Martin County. Link to the New York times article:

<http://bit.ly/MHurchalla> ■

Dorian: Near Miss Brings Out the Best

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While donated goods are no longer being accepted, the organization continues to accept monetary gifts to help our neighbors in the Bahamas rebuild their lives.

Operation 300 was created in honor of Navy Seal Aaron Vaughn, of Stuart, who was killed in the line of duty in 2011. For More Information:

<https://www.facebook.com/Operation300/>



Facebook, Operation 300, Supplies for Hurricane Dorian Victims

Our Mission

The Guardians of Martin County is a 501(c)3 organization committed to helping shape a positive future for Martin County, by educating residents about the value of balancing natural and man-made resources to enrich the quality of life in our communities.