

## Two VIPs Visit the Refuge

by Sarah Ashton & Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chairs

As part of advocating for improved water quality, we occasionally meet with key decision-makers and the people who influence key decision-makers. The goal of these meetings is to help those people understand the impact of their decisions on the health of the Refuge and to identify how we can help them improve water quality. Ideally, those meetings occur at the Refuge so that the VIPs can get a first-hand understanding of our environment. This article will discuss recent visits to the Refuge from Florida [Representative Ray Rodriguez](#) and [Charlette Roman](#), Governing Board Member of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD).

Representative Rodriguez and his family visited the Refuge in early November and started their visit by touring the Refuge's best restrooms in America before meeting with members of the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society (DDWS). Rep. Rodriguez started the meeting by saying that he expected that the Florida legislature would provide roughly the same level of funding (\$682 million) for water quality projects that it [provided last year](#), but that the legislature would not agree to the [governor's request](#) that the legislature approve three years of recurring funding at this level. When asked how the Florida legislature would likely respond to the legislative proposal that [Governor DeSantis recently made](#) that is based on the work of the Blue-Green Algae Task Force, Representative Rodriguez stated that he had not yet read the proposal.

Sanibel Mayor Kevin Ruane was also at the meeting and he and Representative Rodriguez provided insight into how local communities can successfully work with the state of Florida to implement water related projects. When speaking about the water quality initiatives in DeSantis' proposal, Ruane said that "We can get everything we want."

The approach that Ruane advocated is based on local leaders understanding what is needed in their own backyard, developing realistic plans, sharing those plans with others and coming up with some local funding. Ruane gave an example of this approach: the ongoing plans to upgrade Sanibel's [Donax Reclaimed Water Treatment Facility](#).

As Ruane explained, the city of Sanibel has spent \$1.6 million on plans to redesign the facility and is willing to share those plans with other municipalities who are starting a similar process. Sanibel will also spend millions to upgrade the facility. However, because of the work Sanibel has done on the project, in their last budget, the state of Florida included \$500,000 to help defray some of the cost of the upgrade. See [more](#).

Rodriguez elaborated on the importance of local funding. He said that every year when the Florida legislature vets all the projects that have been submitted for funding they put the projects into two piles. The first pile is the projects that have local funding and the second pile is the projects that don't. Rodriguez said that the vast majority of projects that the legislature funds come from the first pile.

An example of how the type of interaction that Ruane and Rodriguez discussed occurs is the recently held research symposium hosted by the FLC (Florida League of Cities) Center for Municipal Research. This symposium brought together state, regional, and local government water experts to review the current state of water affairs in Florida, to discuss available funding, and to review current and future projects. See [more](#).

Upon conclusion of the meeting, Rodriguez and his family toured the Refuge on their own.

In February 2019, Charlette Roman was appointed to the Governing Board of the SFWMD, where she represents Collier, Lee, Charlotte, Hendry, Highlands, Glades, Okeechobee, Orange, Osceola, and Polk counties. Her visit in early November also began with a tour of the Refuge's best restrooms in America, and that was followed by a brief tour of the Visitor & Education Center before she sat down for a meeting with members of DDWS.

During the meeting we discussed the history of the Refuge and how, over the last decade, the number of visitors to the Refuge has doubled, the amount of land being managed has increased, and yet the Refuge staff has been cut in half.

We pointed out to her how Sanibel sits at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River and, as a result, is directly impacted by the excess nutrients and algal blooms that flow down the river. We also made her aware of the educational role that DDWS plays both in terms of the million visitors a year who come to the Refuge and also in terms of the Society's program to annually bring thousands of school children to the Refuge for a combination of classroom education and field work.

After a brief meeting, we took a tour of the Refuge lead by Jeremy Conrad, the Lead Refuge Biologist. During the tour we stopped at the Mangrove Overlook, the Observation Tower, and the Calusa Shell Mound Trail. At the observation tower we had the opportunity to observe a flock of roughly 100 great white pelicans. Throughout the tour, Roman enthusiastically asked questions about the Refuge and the Society. She was particularly interested in understanding the impact last year's ecological disaster had on the Refuge.

At the conclusion of the tour, we had a luncheon meeting that included James Evans, Director of Natural Resources, city of Sanibel and Ryan Orgera, CEO of Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. This meeting gave an opportunity for Evans and Orgera to engage Roman in conversation about the work of the SFWMD.

As part of this meeting, we asked Roman what the DDWS can do to help the SFWMD. Roman said that one way that we can help is by letting the public know that a lot of the projects that the SFWMD are involved with, such as the [C-43 reservoir](#), take a long time to complete. Her concern is that because these projects take so long, that people will feel that nothing is being done to address our water-related issues.

At the end of the visit, Roman made a comment similar to the key message of the meeting we had with Rodriguez and Ruane – that Sanibel is the place it is, and J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge is the place it is, in large part, due to a broad coalition of people working together.

**In case you missed it:** Governor DeSantis recently announced a new web site that provides updates on water quality issues. See [more](#).