

Orlando Sentinel OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

Misguided court decision hurts Florida and wetlands

THE INVADING SEA
FLORIDA AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

By Steve Updegraff

The U.S. Supreme Court's recent unanimous decision to define a "wetland" solely as a body of water directly connected to a navigable waterway will have damaging effects to humans, wildlife and rare fragile ecosystems across the nation unless individual state and local agencies take up the challenge and ensure protection.

After the court's ruling, the federal Environmental Protection Agency is now prevented from being the "gatekeeper" of development and/or pollution of land directly or indirectly connected to our drinking water. They no longer will be able to inspect land and require a rigorous permitting process prior to development or release of pollutants.

For Floridians, this has particularly ominous implications. As our state experiences unprecedented growth, new citizens and developers may not even be aware that their drinking water lies beneath their feet in the unique porous limestone of the Floridan Aquifer. The entire Florida peninsula can be thought of as a natural sand filter that empties into an underground river, the Floridan Aquifer.

There are unique "wetlands" in Florida called "ephemeral," in that they go through cycles of wet, then dry, then wet again. These lands are not connected to any "waterway" but drain underground to our aquifer. These "landlocked" wetlands are home to 50% of listed threatened species.

Most importantly, these ecosystems are "carbon sinks" and are the most effective resource we have to recharge the aquifer with clean water. Only 5% of our nation's wild lands are wetlands, with a small percentage of those wetlands being "landlocked." Proportionally, Florida possesses more of these ecosystems than any other state.

Downstream from these landlocked ponds are springs that feed our brackish estuaries, allowing seagrasses to grow and serving as a nursery for all of our marine life. Damaging these areas not only ruins recreational fishing but the whole food web, impacting the quality and quantity of seafood available.

But while this misguided decision may have greater implications for Florida than other states, there are also many reasons to believe our state's long history of environmental activism and stewardship may uniquely prepare us to fix this through state legislation.

One of the most notable figures to sound the alarm regarding the fragility and uniqueness of our aquifer was Marjorie Harris Carr, a native Floridian who is credited with leading the charge in stopping the Florida Cross Barge Canal from bisecting our state in the '70s. It took a presidential order to stop its construction. For decades, wetlands that are not connected to navigable water have been paved and built over, jeopardizing water quality and quantity.

This problem was recognized by all the water management districts in Florida in the '80s and '90s when a bipartisan effort was made to protect our water quality and, in so doing, preserve unique ecosystems that man cannot re-create. It was just one example of Floridians' long history of putting aside politics in order to protect the wild, natural things that make our state great.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the exceptionally divisive 2000 presidential election, then-Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican, joined U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, a Democrat, in the Oval Office for the signing of a bipartisan bill to fund the beginnings of Everglades restoration. As Floridians, it's what we do.

Our very existence is now tied directly to these landlocked wetlands. Science has yet to understand all the rare connections that may help humanity in ways we cannot imagine. The hope lies in state leaders that have the capability to learn and understand how vital these areas are to their constituents and will work with other leaders of diverse backgrounds to continue to protect these wetlands from destruction and pollution.

Floridians have demonstrated the capacity to protect valuable environmental assets through state and local legislation. It is up to us to make this a priority. As a bonus, we can set a great example for other states facing similar peril from a short-sighted Supreme Court decision.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

Healing Central Florida is the work of generations

Forty years is a long time. Children grow up and start families of their own. Inspiring voices of your childhood's past become guiding memories. Businesses open and close, and politicians and social movements come and go. And across generations, I have been blessed to experience a community transform from the ground up.

It was 40 years ago last Sunday that my father founded The Hope Church of Orlando in the Greater Washington Shores Community. Growing up, I witnessed how neighborhoods struggled to thrive in an area long burdened by systemic challenges and limited economic opportunity. But my father looked around these issues and saw something more: a place where faith and fellowship could join hands and create a better future.

As we celebrate Intergenerational Month in September, I find myself struck by the long legacy of my father's work. He always hoped that when he retired, I would follow in his footsteps as senior pastor — which, despite my best efforts to the contrary as a teen and young adult, did indeed happen. But it wasn't until years later, in 2001, that I truly began to embrace my calling and build upon the foundation he had laid.

While ministering to our parishioners, my wife Deborah and I saw the plight of families and children living in substandard housing in deplorable conditions. We felt God calling for us to act ... and we weren't the only ones. Policymakers, nonprofits, business owners, residents — so many people wanted change in Washington Shores. All they needed was a vision to unite them. My father welcomed me to join him on his God-given platform to voice a vision that many would come to rally around, embrace, and see themselves making a valiant contribution.

Our answer ultimately was Hope Center West, a ministry-meets-social-action campus that spans more than 50 acres of businesses, schools and community spaces. Alongside partners of all stripes, we've invested millions of dollars into this "Live, Work, Learn, Play and Worship" ecosystem — and the results speak for themselves.



By Allen T.D. Wiggins

Through public, private, and philanthropic support, we've provided affordable and attainable housing, given rent, utility, medical, and bereavement care, and became known for offering, in many cases, some of the lowest rents in the area. In addition, we have partnered with other ministries, like First Baptist Church of Orlando, to create programs to help previously incarcerated women find transitional housing and give them assistance as they navigate their new lives.

Although we've made great strides in housing, our work was more comprehensive, more like a "full court press" in order to usher in transformation. We've invested many resources, both human and capital, in facilitating the creation of a seamless educational pipeline by partnering with organizations like HeadStart, Frontline Outreach, Legends Academy K-8 STEM, and Jones High School. We helped local restaurants stay afloat during the pandemic by contracting them to prepare and provide free fresh hot meals for the seniors and the hungry. And we brought a Walmart Neighborhood Market to provide fresh, affordable groceries in a longstanding food desert.

While our impact spans many causes, it has one overarching goal: building stronger families across generations. From the nuclear family — a single mom who needs a safe home for her children as she gets back on her feet — to the wider family of neighbors, students and teachers, faith groups, and local leaders, we are all connected ... and we all can use our gifts to help each other thrive.

Like my father, I know that what we've achieved today is only the start. We are planting the seed that our children and grandchildren will tend to maturity, as we dismantle the barriers of inequality and heal the hurts of the past. But however long it takes, I have faith that the fruits of our labors will build a stronger community — for generations to come.

Archbishop Allen T.D. Wiggins is the senior pastor at The Hope Church and founder of Hope Center West.

GUEST COLUMNIST

Are we headed toward totally privatizing education in Florida?

You have to give it to him. Gov. Ron DeSantis' scheme to weaken our public schools in favor of increased private, religious and home schooling has worked. As expected, when he eliminated income restrictions on school vouchers, there was a surge in applicants this summer. Heck, even wealthy folks can have the state pick up the tab for all or part of their children's private schooling.

Florida may be on the trajectory toward total privatization of our public schools.

What was originally a strategy to help poor children exit failing schools is now a dark design to destroy public education, supplant it with private schools, and bill the taxpayers.

As of Aug. 18, 2023, school vouchers, officially the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, siphoned off 407,000 students from our public schools while the rest of the 430,000 applications were being reviewed and more were coming in. DeSantis called this "... a monumental increase over last year's enrollment of nearly 250,000 students."

It's also a monumental decrease in funding for public education.

If it appears to be an incongruent strategy by a governor who frequently praises Florida's public education, it is. But it's also political insurance against fallout from both sides. DeSantis aims for positive media coverage of his public-school governance, while he simultaneously props up standard institutions that use the same Christian nationalist playbook he thinks will advance him to the presidency.

Vouchers have a shameful past. In the 1950s and '60s, Southern states used them to skirt the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that declared school segregation unlawful. The result was white flight to private schools, paid for with vouchers that drained taxes from the wretched public schools the Black children were left in. Vouchers were nothing more than Jim Crow in a new shirt.

DeSantis is using them for a different kind of segregation — severing his straight, white Christian philosophy from our modern democratic ethos.

Floridians are facing an existential threat to their schools and their democracy. The Education Law Center warns: "Already underfunded public school districts will be financially gutted. The potential for harm to local public-school districts, which serve most Florida students, is extreme."

And so is the harm to our kids.

A years-long investigation by the Orlando Sentinel and reviews by major independent organizations found too many voucher schools offer a substandard education.

Reporters uncovered mostly Christian-based curricula, much of which was anti-science, anti-LGBTQ, racially biased and almost completely unregulated.

DeSantis has already deformed Flor-



By June S. Neal

ida's public education with his racist, homophobic legislation. And private, religious schools (we don't have enough information on home schools) are fertile spots to indoctrinate even more students with his straight, white and Christian ethos. "For the 2023 school year, there are 1,448 religiously affiliated private schools serving 298,720 students in Florida," according to Private School

Review.

The Sentinel reported, "Some private schools in Florida that rely on public funding teach students that dinosaurs and humans lived together, that God's intervention prevented Catholics from dominating North America and that slaves who 'knew Christ' were better off than free men who did not."

The reporters found, "The books are rife with religious and political opinions on ... abortion, gay rights. They disparage religions other than Protestant Christianity and cultures other than those descended from white Europeans." And yet, as of February 2023, only 27.2% of students using the voucher program are white. Further, 81.4% of the schools accepting vouchers are officially religious.

And the vouchers are supporting actively anti-LGBT schools. In 2020, "14% of Florida's nearly 147,000 scholarship students attended private schools where homosexuality was condemned or, at a minimum, unwelcome," reporters discovered. Several private schools that received millions of dollars in vouchers promoted conversion therapy for LGBTQ students.

So, besides bigotry, what else are taxpayers getting for their money?

Lack of accountability in unregulated schools, for one. "Private elementary and secondary schools in Florida are not licensed, approved, accredited or regulated" by the state, according to the Florida Department of Education.

The arbitrary appropriation of money is also crippling our schools. In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center found: "No state comes close to Florida in the allocation of public funds to private schools ... decreasing per pupil funding by 12% from \$9,799 to \$8,628 while the rest of the country's schools increased their spending by 9.6%." Florida ranks "seventh from the bottom of all states in per pupil funding at \$9,346."

Public education is fundamental to democracy. It's the nation's singular institution structured to cohere a hugely heterogeneous population into Americans. Whatever deficits our schools have should be fixed with the tax dollars we are now diverting to private schools that are operating on principles most Americans have worked for decades to eradicate.

June S. Neal, of Delray Beach, is a former columnist for the Hartford Courant and for Northeast Magazine.

GUEST COLUMNIST

Hold on to your rights as a voter



By Julia Maskivker

Tuesday is National Voter Registration Day, and some reflections on what registration suppression efforts may do to democracy here in Florida and nationally are in order.

First, let's begin with some basic

thoughts. Mass registration is fundamental for the integrity of elections. When the state has access to the group of citizens that is eligible to vote, it ensures that those who are not legally permitted to do so (for various reasons including age, nationality, residence, etc.) do not exercise a right they indeed do not have or may not have yet. Mass registration also ensures that citizens eligible to vote are not stopped from doing so for suspicious reasons.

In a liberal democracy with a robust rule of law ethics, registration systems should work according to the principle that nobody should be denied the opportunity to participate in elections on the basis of factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, income level, etc. If these criteria were a valid source for considering someone ineligible to vote, then, we wouldn't be talking about a democracy anymore; at least not a modern democracy built on the principle of universal rights. It is true that the Greeks, who created democracy, were not universally inclusive, but we do not pretend to admire them for that. It is for these reasons that we should be alarmed, as citizens of modern democracies that value rights, when public officials and legislators enact laws that suppress voter registration efforts.

In May of this year, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed an omnibus bill (SB 7050) with significant voter suppression effects. For example, the law imposes harsh penalties on third-party organizations conducting voter registration drives. It applies steep fines for returning applications for voter registration after the due date, and it bars noncitizens and citizens with certain prior convictions from volunteering in registration efforts. The law also criminalizes retaining any type of voter information in order to organize any "get-out-the-vote" initiatives in our community. The law contains many other provisions that make it harder to cast mail-in ballots and request them. It is not shocking that this bill has already been challenged in court.

The above brings me to a final general reflection. We should make it easier, not harder, for citizens to register to vote. Many states in the nation have already established programs for automatic voter registration and more are likely to adopt them relatively soon. These new systems would make it virtually impossible for ill-motivated politicians to limit the right to vote by altering registration rules.

Automatic registration systems make registration a default option — citizens can opt-out, but their names are added to the voting roster automatically when they interact with government agencies. Then these agencies would transfer voter information electronically to election officials instead of traditional paper forms. These simple measures increase registration rates (and voter turnout rates consequently), clean up the rolls, and save resources given their significant efficiency. Importantly, they also make sure that everybody who is legally able and willing to vote can do so without discrimination and excessive burden.

It is not a surprise that politicians who seek to decrease voting turnout by minorities and the poor are against initiatives to ease the process of voter registration since the latter tend to support political alternatives that we would consider better aligned with liberals and Democrats than with conservative Republicans. But we should remember that in a democracy in which rights and liberties are respected, all politicians and their political parties should strive to win adherents by using legitimate mechanisms of discussion, debate, and policy formulation. Bending the rules, even when popularly elected legislatures such as Florida's enable this by providing their allegiance to unstoppable executives with ethically dubious ends, is not consistent with democratic principles.

Political scientists and other scholars of democracy have been alerting the public for some time now about rapid rates of democratic erosion, which take place when democratically elected leaders succeed in debilitating institutional checks to their power. DeSantis' overarching law is an example of this democratic decline. We should understand that when democracy is weakened and used for nondemocratic goals, we all lose, no matter the party, no matter the ideology.

Julia Maskivker is a professor of political science and political theory at Rollins College and author of "The Duty to Vote."