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*Destination: Florida*

**M**ARCH 12, 2002, was a thrilling day for Al Hoffman. An inveterate risk taker, Florida's biggest home builder took his WCI Communities public despite an economic downturn that had dried up interest in IPOs. In the morning, Hoffman watched his company sell 6.9 million shares at \$19 each, raising \$131 million. As the day went on, he watched the new shares rise 20 percent more before closing at \$22.70.<sup>1</sup>

Wall Street, that spring day, was buying up Florida living in a frenzy that harkened back to the Sunshine State real estate boom of the 1920s. WCI (NYSE: WCI) is book-ending the Everglades with 36 master-planned communities on both coasts of South Florida. (Golf holes: 600. Boat slips: 1,000. Average home price: \$528,000.) The company's marketing research into the 76 million strong baby boom generation now reaching retirement shows that natural amenities are a top draw. WCI's pitch: "From the tree-lined fairways of west central Florida to the beachfront condominiums of Naples and Fort Myers, to the beauty and luxury of Palm Beach and southeast Florida, WCI is building communities that embrace the native environment and create an unparalleled living experience."<sup>2</sup>

But as he savored his business success, Hoffman fretted privately, at least to the man he had helped send to the governor's mansion.

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A former fighter pilot with a penchant for polo, Alfred Hoffman Jr. got his first taste of luxury housing as a child growing up in Chicago. His dad was a laborer in a poultry slaughterhouse on the South Side who daydreamed of investing in real estate. As a summer treat, Alfred Hoffman Sr. would buy his kids ice cream cones and drive them to the Windy City's luxury neighborhoods to ooh and aah over rich people's houses.<sup>3</sup> Those drives inspired Hoffman to chase his father's dreams. West Point, a Harvard MBA, and Florida's booming retiree real estate market helped him achieve them while he was still in his forties. He struck it rich developing one of Florida's megareirement communities, 14,000-resident Sun City Center south of Tampa, in the 1970s.

Hoffman, now in his seventies, has retired as CEO of WCI Communities, the home-building behemoth he founded and took public. He is bald, a tad bit frail. But his small, ice-blue eyes twinkle with the pull he still has on elected officials from the White House down. In 2005, President Bush named him ambassador to Portugal. Campaign contributions are no small part of his sway. Hoffman and his immediate family made \$434,394 in federal political contributions during the 2000, 2002, and 2004 election cycles, none of which went to Democrats.<sup>4</sup> As finance chairman for the Republican National Committee during both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns, Hoffman proved he could convince others to dig deep, too. During a single tent party at his Fort Myers home in 2003, Hoffman raised \$1.7 million for President Bush's reelection bid.<sup>5</sup> He was a similar sensation heading up fund-raising for Jeb Bush's successful gubernatorial campaigns in 1998 and 2002.

In summer 2002, after the president signed the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill, soft money had become a politically incorrect conversation topic. But Hoffman has never been PC. He is notorious for calling the endangered Florida panther a "bastardized species" whose tiny numbers stand in the way of more aggressive development in South Florida.<sup>6</sup> That June, Hoffman asked a *Miami Herald* reporter at a fund-raising gala: "Who is to judge how much is obscene? How much is too much? Compared to what?" He complained about Americans spending an estimated \$4 billion each year on pornography. He fretted that people spent more on Starbucks than on campaigns. "I call that obscene," he said.<sup>7</sup>

Turns out, Al Hoffman that June had something heavier weighing on him. An imminent threat, he thought, to WCI Communities. That

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month, as Jeb Bush's reelection campaign was heating up, Hoffman sent the governor a memo, talking points, and a sixty-page study commissioned by WCI: "The Impacts of Florida's Mature Residents."<sup>8</sup> The memo raised this alarm: the percentage of seniors migrating to Florida had declined in both the 1980 and 1990 U.S. census. Hoffman quoted Charles Longino, a national expert on senior migration trends, who predicted another drop in the 2000 census. "You can couple this negative trend with the fact that a growing percentage of Florida's seniors are leaving the state," Hoffman wrote. The developer highlighted in bold the fact that he believed would be most alarming to Bush, and a trend that might alarm WCI's new shareholders as well: "**North and South Carolina, combined, attracted more relocating retirees than did Florida in 2000.**" He concluded: "We must act before Florida loses untold billions in revenue and its sustained quality of life to other states."<sup>9</sup>

No one is seriously worried, of course, that Florida is going to stop growing. Or even that it will no longer be a top retirement spot. By 2015, demographers predict, Florida's population will reach 21 million, making it the third-largest state in the nation.<sup>10</sup> By then, it also will be the oldest state, with 5.5 million residents older than sixty-five.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Hoffman, Bush, and other business and political leaders fear Florida is losing its share of the wealthiest retirees: those who fill the state's coffers paying Florida's property, sales, and intangibles taxes—those who can afford luxury housing units like the ones in WCI's Lesina, a shiny condominium tower rising 20 stories above the mangrove swamps of McIlvane Bay in southwest Florida between Naples and Marco Island. The cheapest units cost \$900,000.

Hoffman's report boasted that Florida's current crop of retirees generates \$2.7 billion a year in sales and use taxes yet costs the state only \$1.28 billion in health and human services. Advocates for the elderly argue that is because Florida scrimps on care for lower-income elders. For example, the state's waiting list for those in need of basic services, such as home health care, to keep them out of nursing homes is 15,000 and climbing. Consider the consequences if the balance were to tip: a growing lower-income retiree population and fewer top-bracket taxpayers to help cover costly elder services. It is easy to see how the specter of losing wealthy baby boomers to states like North Carolina or Arizona strikes fear into housing developers and politicians alike. And that is why

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Jeb Bush jumped on Al Hoffman's problem, despite its unpopularity in an election year.

Regardless of their political stripes, most Floridians lament the state's rampant population growth as they bake in bumper-to-bumper traffic watching another orange grove make way for another drugstore chain. Many were astonished to read about Bush's proposed solution to the retiree predicament: an aggressive marketing effort called Destination Florida.

In July 2002, Governor Bush appointed a fourteen-member commission to lure more retirees to the Sunshine State. (Its honorary chairman: beloved former Miami Dolphins coach Don Shula, now a steakhouse mogul.) Bush charged the commission with figuring out how Florida could better compete for retirees with other Sunbelt havens, and particularly how it could woo those 76 million baby boomers flush with inheritance cash. "For more than half a century, Florida's beautiful natural environment and rich cultural heritage have made our state the destination of choice for retirees," the governor said in a press release touting Destination Florida. "We are committed to maintaining our first-place ranking, and will aggressively sell the advantages of living in Florida to all of our nation's seniors."<sup>12</sup>

The idea for Destination Florida had come from a WCI vice president named Ken Plonski. Hoffman had hired Plonski, an affable PR man, away from his top competitor, Del Webb—developer of Arizona's sprawling Sun City and other megaretirement communities throughout the Sunbelt and eastern seaboard. Seven years before, Plonski helped lead a successful marketing effort in Arizona to woo more seniors. That campaign is credited with bringing the state up to third, behind Florida and California, in luring new retirees. But there was one thing about Arizona's effort that Plonski did not mention to Bush. By 1999, Arizona taxpayers and lawmakers had begun to question seriously whether the benefits of all those new elders outweighed the health care costs and transportation problems they were creating. That year, Arizona quit funding the effort.<sup>13</sup>

One of the puzzling things about the Destination Florida campaign was its emphasis on marketing, on public relations, and on other states' promotional efforts—rather than a hard look at what about balmy Florida could possibly be turning retirees off. For decades, state demog-

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raphers had noted a growing trend among a group of retirees known as “half backs.” These are elders who retired from the Midwest or Northeast to the Sunshine State, then decided to move halfway back home: to North Carolina or Virginia—someplace where they could escape Florida’s crowds and stifling summer heat. Why are a growing percentage of seniors leaving? It is not to avoid state income taxes. The rival states have them; Florida does not. It is hard to believe that they are being lured by better marketing campaigns. But that is what the governor seemed to be saying. “In the 1980s, several states in and out of the Sun Belt have formed retiree-attraction programs,” read the Destination Florida press release. “As a result, Florida began to see a decline in seniors choosing to relocate and retire in the Sunshine State.”<sup>14</sup>

Could anything else be to blame? Could it be the water problems? The teeth-clenching gridlock on Interstate 95 through South Florida, Interstate 4 through Central Florida? Could it be, for some, the cookie-cutter sprawl that makes many Florida vistas indiscernible from those in other parts of suburban America? Or school districts so crowded that one county banned children’s backpacks because they took up too much space in the halls? Such questions could have started with the Destination Florida commissioners themselves. Several members, including chairman T. O’Neal Douglas, a retired Jacksonville insurance executive, had to fly into Florida for the meetings from second homes in the mountains of western North Carolina or other rival retirement states.

Bush’s office launched its retiree-recruitment effort with statistics to try to help Floridians see the problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, the state’s age fifty-five and older population had grown by 65 percent per decade. During the 1980s, the percentage had dropped to 29. During the 1990s, it dropped to 19.

The stats did not make the sell. Floridians—many who had called the state home for generations, many who had just moved down—were furious. A torrent of letters to the governor’s office questioned the need for another classic Florida marketing campaign as they expressed concerns over pressures created by growth.

People were particularly upset to see the recruitment effort following one of the most severe droughts in Florida history. The drought had sparked more than wildfires. It brought up an old debate. From Fort Lauderdale to Jacksonville to Tampa, Floridians asked government officials the same question over and over again: why does the state

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approve so much new development when it does not have enough water for the residents who live here now?

Barbara Down of the Villages, one of Florida's largest retirement communities, with more than eight thousand residents living in a huge, low-density maze north of Orlando, wrote Governor Bush a letter that was typical of the response to Destination Florida. "I have moved to what I thought would be 'paradise' only to find there are critical water problems and heavy-duty sinkhole activity," Down wrote. "With regard to water, we are told to conserve—which we do—and then they use the adjusted water volumes to justify new growth."<sup>15</sup>

Barbara Matthews of Tampa tapped off an e-mail: "With all due respect, after having lived in this state for 30 years, I would think it would be more to the point to ensure that those of us who live here now will have enough water without being severely restricted in its use, adequate roadways without destroying even more of the environment and necessary services . . . before inviting more hordes to cross the state line and create more problems than we already have."<sup>16</sup>

Bill Nichols of Winter Park put it more bluntly. "We need more seniors," he wrote, "like we need more sinkholes."<sup>17</sup>

TURNING POINT

In the fall of 2002, as Jeb Bush's Destination Florida group met around the state to gather testimony from invited experts, the nation's drought began to wane. In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg lifted the city's water restrictions, and cabbies could wash their cars again. New Jersey also lifted limits on car washing and lawn watering but remained in a state of emergency because of depleted groundwater levels.<sup>18</sup> In Florida, the rivers began to brim again. Dry lake beds gradually filled. But it was not enough to replenish the overdrawn aquifers. In some parts of Florida, developers heard a dreaded word: moratorium. In Hillsborough County, for example, Plant City told companies including WCI that it might not be able to provide water to new developments already approved by the city commission.<sup>19</sup>

The drought and its aftermath represented a turning point in the politics of water in Florida. Developers had spent 150 years desperately trying to drain the state and get rid of water. Now, they were desperate to find it. Up to now, water issues had been the passion and purview of

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environmentalists, farmers, and the state's vast water bureaucracy created in 1972. Suddenly, water supply became the top concern of Florida's business community. Al Hoffman made sure of it.

While head of the largest community-development company in Florida as well as the Republican National Committee's finances, Hoffman also chaired the most powerful business group in Florida, the Council of 100. The private, invitation-only association of Florida CEOs was created in 1961 by a governor named Farris Bryant, who wanted a trusted panel to "provide advice to him on key Florida issues from a business perspective."<sup>20</sup> For more than forty years, the council had helped sway policy in Tallahassee. Recently, Bush had tapped the council to help him sell controversial overhauls of Florida's civil service and education systems.<sup>21</sup>

Now, Hoffman wanted the council to dive into water supply. With Bush's blessing, he appointed thirty of its CEOs to a task force that would recommend "bold action to assure an adequate water supply" for Florida.<sup>22</sup> They included Gary Morse, developer of the Villages, and Llywd Ecclestone, an idol in golf course community development for his PGA National Resort of Palm Beach Gardens. Hoffman put yet another developer, Lee Arnold, in charge of the task force.

A licensed commercial pilot partial to aviator sunglasses and black leather jackets, Lee Arnold is the CEO of a commercial real estate firm called Colliers Arnold, which has offices in Clearwater, Tampa, Orlando, and Fort Myers. He likes to say that he specializes in "problem properties," that is, anything that may have a problem snagging local or state development approval. As chairman of the Council of 100's water-supply task force, Arnold invited a select group of experts to advise the group, which met secretly over the course of a year. The majority of the advisers thanked in the task force's final report were lawyer-lobbyists who worked for developers. Few were scientists. None were environmentalists.<sup>23</sup> Arnold kept Hoffman and Bush apprised of the task force's progress. At some point, Bush must have expressed concern about the lack of input from the state's considerable environmental community. In an e-mail to Bush in the winter of 2003, Arnold shared with the governor white papers, PowerPoint presentations, and other parts of the task force's work. He wrote: "We will add now the envior [*sic*] folks as per your suggestion. Anytime you want to discuss water give me a call I will burn gas

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in my airplane and buy lunch.” (Arnold went on to recommend Bush keep PowerBars on hand and read the book *Body for Life*, a rigorous-but-popular diet and exercise program. “You have such stress and are doing great work at the expense of your future health,” Arnold wrote. “CARPE DIEM. You will be remembered for your water fix forever.”)<sup>24</sup>

But Florida was not in for an easy water fix. Arnold was genuinely surprised when the work of his task force, made public by the *St. Petersburg Times* newspaper in the fall of 2003, churned a tidal wave of controversy. Buried in thirty-four pages of facts about projected population growth and water resources, and well-reasoned arguments about what might be done, was the recommendation that the state consider “a system that enables water distribution from water-rich areas to water-poor areas.”<sup>25</sup> The translation was clear to anyone who had followed Florida politics for a while. The developers had drawn a bead on the state’s storied Suwannee River, targeted every decade or so by schemes to pipe water from north to south. Arnold declared the Suwannee region “sitting in the Saudi Arabia of water.”<sup>26</sup> It was an unfortunate metaphor, given that Saudi Arabia has some of the worst water scarcity on the planet.

Winding 250 miles from the Okefenokee Swamp in southeastern Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico, the Suwannee is the color of long-steeped iced tea, as inviting as a glass of it on a Florida summer day. Along its jungle-covered banks, Spanish moss hangs from above. Bumpy cypress knees protrude from below. Several of the river’s bends open to deep, azure springs; some secret, some packed with buzz-cut local boys and Speedo-clad Europeans on hot afternoons. Black birds called anhingas sun themselves on half-submerged logs. Great blue herons fish along the sandy shore. And every once in a while, a giant, prehistoric fish called a Gulf sturgeon will fling itself out of the river and land with a splash. All of which gives the river a magical feel, like being transported into a novel by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Born-again believers from small towns near the river, along with lots of babies each year, are still baptized in the Suwannee. But people from throughout the South take pride in the river that is the least polluted, and the least obstructed, of all major rivers in the United States. Though he never saw the Suwannee, it inspired nineteenth-century songwriter Stephen Foster, of “Oh! Susanna” and “Camptown Races” fame, to write what would become Florida’s state song. Even in the southern reaches of

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the state, Floridians were incensed over the Council of 100's suggestions that North Florida's water resources might be diverted to help fuel South Florida's growth.

The developers might as well have recommended that the state change its official song from "Way Down Upon the Suwannee River" to Grandmaster Flash's hip-hop version of "New York, New York."

### "OUR WATER IS NOT FOR SALE!"

Some saw the Council of 100's report as the opening shot in a brand-new water war for Florida. Over the years, communities from Miami to Jacksonville had, during drought, battled over rights to water. None of those conflicts were as painful, or long ranging, as the aptly named Tampa Bay Water Wars.

The fights over freshwater in the counties surrounding wide-mouthed Tampa Bay on the west coast of Florida have roots in the 1920s, when Hillsborough County's coastal leaders split off and created their own county, called Pinellas. Just like Florida, Pinellas County is a peninsula surrounded by water on three sides. It is home to some of the loveliest white-sand beaches in all of Florida, and to some of the most spectacular art deco resorts in the state as well: the pink Renaissance Vinoy on Tampa Bay, the even-pinker Don CeSar on the Gulf of Mexico. Also just like Florida, the county is so beautiful that it is being loved to death. It is the densest of all the state's 67 counties, with 3,392 people packed into every square mile. Florida averages 296 people for each square mile of land. The nationwide average is 80.<sup>27</sup>

With only four bridges between Pinellas and the mainland, it is not the place you would want to be if a major hurricane came ashore at Tampa Bay. In that way it is like New Orleans used to be: a disaster waiting to happen.

Pinellas County and the city of St. Petersburg were some of the first governments in Florida to blow out their natural water supply, over-pumping groundwater to the point that the sea rushed in where the freshwater used to be. No worries; the governments simply acquired land for well fields to the north and to the east, in largely uninhabited northwest Hillsborough and central Pasco counties. That worked for awhile. But then those counties, too, began to grow. As Pinellas increased pumping to meet its demand, unwitting neighbors who had settled in the rural coun-

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**A mobile home and shed are swallowed by a sinkhole in Odessa, Florida, in November 1987. Groundwater pumping to quench densely populated areas to the south caused sinkholes, dried-up lakes, and other consequences for rural neighbors to the north. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, more than 80 percent of land subsidence in the United States is a “consequence of our exploitation of underground water.”** (Courtesy of *The Tampa Tribune*.)

tryside near the well fields complained of dropping lake levels, sinkholes, and dried-up wells. Buddy Blain, longtime general counsel at the Southwest Florida Water Management District, remembered driving out to the well fields to see what was going on for himself. He was taken aback by land subsidence so severe that trees were being swallowed: “As you drive into one place all of a sudden you see the tops of trees that are at eye level,” he remembered. “As you got close to it you see that the ground had actually dropped away and made cracks and holes in the land surface.”<sup>28</sup>

The political, legal, and even personal battles fought over Tampa Bay’s water would fill a book of their own, and they have. Honey Rand, spokeswoman for the Southwest Florida Water Management District during some of the most contentious of the water wars, wrote about them in a book by that name. Rand tells of how, from the early 1970s all the way into the mid-1990s, local governments and water agencies either ignored the families with wells run dry or flat out refuted their claims. Sinkholes, dropping lake levels, and disappearing wetlands were just a natural part of the hydrologic cycle, officials told flummoxed residents again and again. Groundwater pumping had nothing to do with it.<sup>29</sup>

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Since this was, after all, a war, it is somehow appropriate that the citizen who finally got through to the water managers was a retired U.S. Army colonel with the Green Berets. Steve Monsees had discovered the bucolic rural lakes of Pasco County while stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa. In 1988, he bought seven acres of land overlooking a 100-acre lake. There was a pond out back and room for horses. Stationed in Africa during the end of his career, he would make it back to Pasco as often as he could to look at his property. In 1989, he began to build his dream home. When he moved in two years later, the hundred-acre lake was nearly gone.<sup>30</sup>

Various agencies and local governments told Monsees it was just the natural rainfall cycle—that the water would eventually return. But the water-management district's own data showed rainfall had been higher than average.

Monsees blamed his problems on the Cross Bar Ranch Well Field in Pasco County, drilled by Pinellas County government to pipe groundwater south for public supply. Armed with photos of his parched landscape, of dead, upside-down turtles in what used to be the lake, Monsees made a passionate speech to the water management district board in 1994. "I am not complaining to you today of lowered lake water levels, but of the total and complete destruction of all water resources in our community," he said of his neighborhood near the well field. "There is not a parallel in the recorded history of this area, under any drought condition, that approaches the totality of this destruction. All surface water is gone. All wetlands and marshes are gone. Most wildlife has disappeared. The fish and the alligators are gone and now even the trees are dying. No man or woman or government has this right. . . . There has not been a day during the past two years that I have not felt violated and angry because of the loss of our lakes, ponds, wetlands and wildlife. Please restore what is lawfully and rightfully ours."<sup>31</sup>

Plenty of citizens in years before, and, more recently, district staff, had been saying the same thing. But there was something particularly effective about Monsees' plea, maybe about him as a person. His heartfelt speech changed hearts, at least those of the political appointees charged with managing the region's water resources. The Southwest Florida Water Management District's board members finally were convinced that groundwater pumping could not last. The locales surrounding Tampa Bay were going to have to come up with new ways to get freshwater.

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Pinellas County and St. Petersburg took a different view. They continued to insist the groundwater was plentiful. They fought the water-management district's threat to restrict their Pasco withdrawal permits, arguing the science was arbitrary and that other users such as agriculture and industry were not being restricted.

For several years more, local governments and water agencies spent millions of taxpayer dollars to duke it out in court. At one point, Pinellas County even sued citizen activists whose wells had gone dry in Pasco. The governments and agencies spent hundreds of thousands more on dueling public relations campaigns—again using the taxpayers' money to sway the taxpayers' opinions. After Pinellas County killed a plan to rehydrate Pasco well fields, a couple of commissioners from Hillsborough and Pasco counties staged a press conference on a boat on the dry bed of Big Fish Lake. The 300-acre lake once produced a statewide record largemouth bass. It had been bone-dry for six years. Hillsborough County Commissioner Ed Turanchik, also chairman of the area's West Coast Regional Water Authority, deadpanned to reporters as he cast his fishing line into dusty weeds: "The plan is to cast for bass, and if that doesn't work, we'll dig for trout."

The litigation alone cost taxpayers more than \$10 million over the years, "with not one new drop of water served to the public," Rand observed.<sup>32</sup> The state legislature began to harangue Tampa Bay officials for their abject inability to either end the wars or supply water to their constituents. Senators ultimately threatened that if local leaders could not fix their own problems, state lawmakers would do it for them. That was an unpleasant prospect. Pinellas County Commissioner Steve Seibert, a Birkenstock-wearing Republican who would later serve as Governor Bush's secretary of community affairs, finally held out an olive branch. A lawyer himself, Seibert could see that the only people benefiting from the water wars were the ones billing by the hour to litigate them. He convinced fellow commissioners it was time to concede. "It wasn't going to be pretty," he said. "Someone was going to figure out that it was public dollars fighting public dollars fighting public dollars."<sup>33</sup>

In 1998, six local governments around Tampa Bay declared a truce and established a regional water utility called Tampa Bay Water. The special district sells water wholesale to utilities in Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties that in turn sell water to 2.5 million people. Its biggest water-supply project to date, a \$148 million seawater desalination

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plant at the mouth of Tampa Bay, has been an expensive disaster, the subject of more attention in chapter II. In 2006, three years after it was supposed to start producing 25 million gallons of water a day, the plant was still not up and running. Yet even without the plant, the communities, by working together instead of warring, had slashed their ground-water pumping by a third.

There is a relevant footnote to the Tampa Bay Water Wars. The name of an up-and-coming Pinellas real estate developer who, in the early 1970s, found the Cross Bar Ranch in Pasco County in the first place and negotiated the deal that allowed Pinellas to pipe water from it. The young man was partial to aviator sunglasses and leather jackets. Lee Arnold's deal at the Cross Bar ensured his future development projects would not be held up for lack of water supply.<sup>34</sup>

You would not think Arnold, as a veteran of the Tampa Bay Water Wars, would have been so surprised by Floridians' outraged response to the Council of 100's water-transfer proposal of 2003. But Florida's real estate dealers, indeed the state's entire economic engine, have a short-term memory for bad news. Such oblivion allows them to sell hurricane-prone beachfront condos and sinkhole-prone ranchettes with equally good cheer.

It is often said about Florida that the southerners live in the northern half of the state, the northerners in the southern half. That is generally true, though changing as newcomers fill in even the most rural reaches of the peninsula, and especially as St. Joe builds its upscale communities on a million acres in the panhandle. When it came to the Florida Council of 100's plan for water supply, northern and southern citizens were united in their opposition. Residents of water-rich North Florida, particularly those in counties along the Suwannee, feared pipes or tankers would someday haul their water south to irrigate new golf courses and subdivision lawns in the state's fast-growing metropolitan areas. "There are people in Williston right now getting shotguns and buckshot," to guard their water, said an elected commissioner named Danny Stevens from rural, sparsely populated Levy County, where the Suwannee River flows into vast grass flats at the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>35</sup>

Shotguns aside, Florida's water does not belong to the people who live near it. Rather, it is held in public trust for the benefit of all Floridians. State law has long allowed transport of water "beyond overlying

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land, across county boundaries, or outside the watershed from which it is taken,” where consistent with the public interest.<sup>36</sup> Recent amendments to the law make regions exhaust all possible local sources before poking their straw in a neighbor’s water.

Still, even residents who presumably would benefit from a north-to-south water transfer did not want it. The Florida senate’s Natural Resources Committee held hearings around the state to air the Council of 100’s ideas. During a hearing at the urban, traffic-choked campus of Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton in southeast Florida, nearly one hundred residents showed up to fend off what they took to be a plot to squeeze more people onto the tip of the state. “We can talk about water supply, water quality, conservation until the cows come home,” said an elementary school teacher named Elisabeth Falcone. “The bottom line is: too many people.”<sup>37</sup>

Statewide, half of Florida’s 67 counties passed resolutions against the plan. Opposition built to a crescendo at the last Florida senate hearing in a rural North Florida town called Chiefland, where more than 1,000 angry residents crammed a high school auditorium, toting signs that said, “Not one damn drop!” and wearing T-shirts that read, “Our Water Is Not for Sale.”

OFF A DUCK’S BACK

At the National Hurricane Center on the campus of Florida International University in Miami, 80 staffers monitor Doppler radar from a fortress built with 10-inch-thick concrete walls laced with 45 miles of steel rods. The building is elevated 5 feet above the floodplain, has roll-down shutters and a tornado shelter, and can withstand a direct hit from a 250-pound projectile flying 60 miles an hour.<sup>38</sup> Governor Bush loved the building. He weathered the hurricane that was the Council of 100’s water-supply flap so well, it was as if he had been holed up behind those walls of concrete and steel.

One hallmark of Bush’s eight-year tenure as governor of Florida was his ability to deflect unpopular projectiles, even ones he had launched himself. During his first successful gubernatorial campaign in 1998, when prodded for specific ideas on environmental and growth issues, Bush had presented a position paper that said he “opposes transferring water from one region to another.”<sup>39</sup> That stance never surfaced during the Council

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of 100's water brouhaha. Bush's earliest comments on the council's plan praised the group for having "the courage to take a position that provokes debate." He declared Florida's water-management system "tired" and "old" and said without changes it would "cost a fortune to continue to be able to grow."<sup>40</sup>

When it became clear that the public would not stand for a water-transfer scheme and the legislature would not touch it, Bush turned his back on the Council of 100 and its water report. Bush similarly distanced himself from the politically unpopular Destination Florida effort he had created. By the spring of 2003, the Destination Florida group had proposed fifty-seven pages of recommendations for making the state more retiree friendly. The centerpiece was a two-pronged marketing campaign to be paid for with state funds. One half of the campaign would work to attract "amenity-seeking baby boomers" aged fifty and over, paying particular attention to "the markets with the highest potential of return, such as New York City and Chicago."<sup>41</sup> For the other half, Florida's taxpayers would foot a campaign to convince themselves of the wisdom of luring new retirees to the Sunshine State. The internal campaign would convince "current residents and policy makers that the value and contributions of its elder residents more than offset the costs of enhancing the state's services and finding better ways to meet current needs."<sup>42</sup> In other words, the state was not adequately funding services for today's retirees and would need to find a lot more money for future retirees. But it would be worth it.

At the state capitol in Tallahassee, Florida's lawmakers had little enthusiasm for the Destination Florida recommendations. They declined to fund a retiree marketing pitch, much less the in-state campaign.

When it came to luring more wealth to the state, Bush would do much better than retirees. During his last years as governor, he orchestrated some of the biggest deals in Florida's history to lure more economically viable growth, such as convincing the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, to set up a major biotechnology complex in Palm Beach County.

Bush called the Scripps coup "a seminal moment in our state's history," as future-changing as the visions of Henry Morrison Flagler and Walt Disney. State and local governments were poised to spend \$800 million in incentives to lure and help build the institute. The governor said it would create 6,500 direct jobs, and that 40,000 more would come

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from a biotech cluster that would grow around the Scripps campus at Mecca Farms, an orange grove in western Palm Beach County at the edge of the Everglades. To allow a shiny new high-tech city in a sensitive area that the local land-use plan declared should remain rural, county commissioners, of course, rewrote the plan. The Army Corps, meanwhile, rushed through environmental permitting in recognition, according to one Corps e-mail, “of the economic benefits to the state.”<sup>43</sup>

In a rare victory for Florida’s environmental defenders, a federal judge stopped construction at the Mecca Farms site. Scripps ended up building its biotech hub in an urban part of the county where its scientists were happier, anyway.

Just like he did better than retirees for luring new population, Bush did better than the Suwannee for finding new water for growth. When he left office in 2006, Florida was steering millions of dollars a year toward new water-supply projects statewide. And Bush’s accelerated Everglades plan was moving at breakneck speed on major projects to supply water to people and cities in southeast Florida.

For now, the pressure is off the Suwannee River. But the next drought will come. When it does, Florida’s thirsty metropolitan areas will be even bigger than before, and the idea of transferring water will pop, like buckshot, into a new developer’s head. In times of scarcity, moving water around is as inevitable as it is political. These facts are known all too well by people in many small, river-blessed towns in the American West. The small cities at the headwaters of the Arkansas River in central Colorado, for example, are under enormous pressure to hand Denver pristine water that locals rely on for whitewater rafting and other staples of the ecotourism economy.<sup>44</sup>

The question for eastern states, including Florida, is whether they will learn from the West, where rivers like the mighty Colorado were over-allocated until nature and even some legal users were left with no water during times of drought. Would emerging water compacts among states in the East, or the courts, begin to put nature first when divvying up water? That was yet to be seen. But one element of the western experience had clearly moved east: the water wars.