

Don't allow Legislature to destroy the seagrass we have left in lagoon

Your Turn

Randy Fine
Guest columnist

Our beloved Indian River Lagoon remains in crisis. That's why, during my five years in the Legislature, I've worked hard to undo problems five decades in the making. That includes bringing home tens of millions of dollars of matching funds to the lagoon, funding multiple projects in the county, and sponsoring legislation to hold politicians accountable who divert funds from sewage system maintenance to their favorite pet projects.

I've also opened up new sources of revenue through tourist tax funds to support lagoon repairs and restoration. But despite all of this, there is much more work to be done.

Like many of you, I remain incredibly troubled by the staggering loss of seagrass in our estuary. It has had real consequences. Since 2009, we've lost around 46,000 acres of natural seagrass. As a result, the Indian River Lagoon has been ground zero in the deaths of hundreds of manatees who starved because they could not find enough seagrass, their key food source.

Yet even in the face of these staggering losses, politicians in Tallahassee have introduced legislation this session that will make it even easier to destroy what little natural seagrass we have left. House Bill 349 would create a program to allow developers to pay money so that they can dig up and destroy the remaining natural seagrass in Brevard (or other coastal areas) with the hope that it can be regrown someplace else, possibly the Panhandle or the Gulf Coast.

These politicians argue that to facilitate new coastal development, we need to provide easier opportunities for the private market to mitigate seagrass loss. As one environmental consultant explained during a recent bill presentation, it's tough to get a permit to destroy seagrass today because there are limited ways to remediate it. So these anti-environmental advocates want to create new ways to remediate seagrass destruction, making it easier to destroy it, and as a result, increase development.

As if the idea of replacing natural Brevard County Indian River Lagoon

seagrass with human-planted replacements in far-off areas of the state wasn't bad enough, scientists have explained that there is a very low success rate for transplanting seagrass. Some estimate that these human-planted seagrass beds fail to take root two-thirds of the time.

My colleague, Rep. Thad Altman, who similarly opposes this bill, has told the story of helping to replant seagrass as a volunteer — and watching it fail. What little seagrass we have left in our lagoon is arguably the hardiest. It has survived decades of damage and pollution. Why would we make it easier to destroy this when its replacement has a limited possibility of success? And might not even be grown in our community?

In other words, why trade a 100% chance of destruction for an unknown chance of success?

I am not anti-development. None of should be — our families all moved here from somewhere and needed places to live, work, and play. But as Florida and Brevard continue to boom as people flee terribly managed states to our north for the free state of Florida, we need to ensure that development happens in a smart and environmentally friendly way.

In this case, the math just doesn't add up. I will not take that risk and neither should the Florida Legislature. Our lagoon and our manatees need help now, and this bill will make our lagoon problems even worse.

I want my constituents to know that I strongly oppose HB 349 and anything that might create more destruction of seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon. That's why I voted no on the bill in its first committee stop in December and why I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

We have no more important natural resource than the Indian River Lagoon. The damage to its ecology has damaged our entire county — and its restoration will take all of us working together. Let's get it done.

Randy Fine is the state representative for the 53rd District of Florida, encompassing Southern Brevard, including Palm Bay, Malabar, and Grant-Val-karia, and parts of West Melbourne and Melbourne.