

COMMISSION

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ing local politics here, when you get a five-body group like this commission, eventually a majority comes together behind the common vision. And they become the governing coalition. They support one another. There's give and take within that coalition. Long before I got there (more than 20 years ago) that was the case. If you're lucky, you also have consensus — it's important. Otherwise, you can easily get off the path."

The newbies ("I'm a committed newbie," says Commissioner Brian Bigelow) are both proud native sons, born in Fort Myers and graduated from Fort Myers High School. Bigelow took his undergraduate degree from the University of Florida, and Mann stayed in the South too, graduating from Vanderbilt University.

Both men spring from families stretching back decades in Lee County. Mann's mother, Barbara B. Mann, is arguably the region's preeminent philanthropist and cultural lodestone. The name of Bigelow's great-great-grandfather, William H. Towles, is engraved on the plaque honoring the commissioners who oversaw the construction of the courthouse in 1915.

Both Mann and Bigelow grew up hunting and fishing across the region, and both cite their love of unspoiled country here as influences on their thinking about growth management and preservation. Mann met his wife, the former Mary Lee Ferguson, when the two were 11 years old and schoolmates. Bigelow has known the young Manns (the commissioner's two sons, local lawyers Frank Jr. and Ian) all his life.

But each has a very different style, no matter what the question: controlling sprawl, protecting groundwater and wetlands, limiting density, or the Medusa-like nest of other problems entwined with those.

"We can continue on the road we're on, to a place we don't want to be, or we can make significant changes," says Bigelow, at 43 the youngest and probably the feistiest commissioner. About 24 hours after assuming his seat on Nov. 20, he sought and failed to convince the commission to sue the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District for dumping water down the Caloosahatchee River.

"That was my biggest vote-getting failure, so far," he says. "If we don't recognize and accept and call the elephant in the middle of the living room exactly what it is, we're not going to bring solutions. We are giving over to special interests, time and time again, day after day."

Mann, a genial 65, is a still-standing political veteran who served in the state legislature for four terms, the state senate after that, and the County commission itself 14 years ago (he also worked as a Tallahassee lobbyist and owned an insurance company here). He's probably lost more elections in his long political career than most politicians have entered, having failed in bids for the governor's seat and the mayor's office in Fort Myers, among others, during the 1980s.

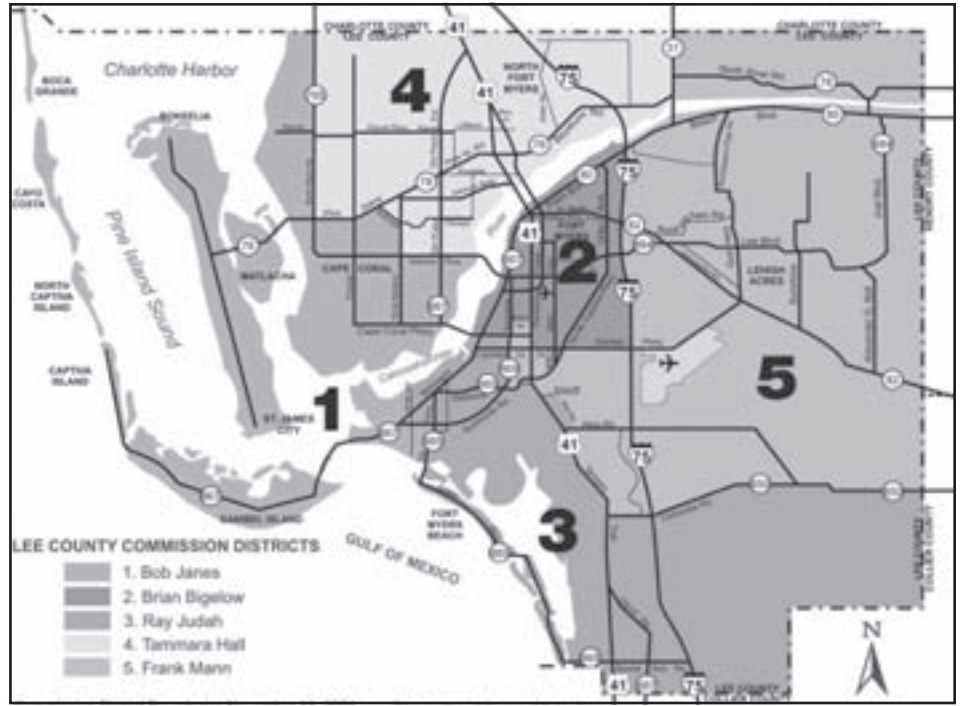
"The overwhelming problem we face is the seeming out-of-control growth," he insists. "So much has changed, so much is lost, and I'm committed to trying to save some of what's left. We have to do growth management through the Lee comprehensive plan. And we have to stand up when a developer wants to put in six units where only one is zoned per acre."

Much of the remaining land that might be saved from sprawling development exists in Mann's District 5, he adds — east Lee County.

But the path to growth management doesn't end with a few parcels in east Lee, and "off the path" is exactly where this commission has marched since Nov. 20, according to many observers, including some commissioners normally reluctant to make public criticisms.

"I thought I would finally have a couple of strong allies (in Bigelow and Mann), but I was wrong," says Judah, who has served 19 years on the commission, where he was frequently characterized in the past as the only real environmentalist in elected office.

His issues have become regional, and he condemns both Bigelow and Mann for running as "environmentalists" but not facing the big issues. "The issues that affect us directly come from beyond our boundaries," Judah explains. "Water from Lake Okeechobee coming from development north of the lake and Sugar south of the lake. Phosphate mining in Hardy and Peace counties that pollute the



Peace River and therefore Charlotte Harbor, two-thirds of which is in Lee County. Air emissions from the (proposed) coal-burning power plant in Glades County, affecting Lee County," and more.

"I am so frustrated," Judah adds. "Everything is so convoluted now on this board."

Tammy Hall, the only female commissioner, puts it this way: "I don't have to like the commissioners, but I do need to respect what the voters said — 'We want them, and we want you.' So I can't get my undies in a grundie, I guess, whether I agree with them or not. But I'm frustrated now.

There was that sense of, we were going to be respectful and get back to where we were, to pull up our bootstraps. It hasn't happened."

Pat Geraghty, a longtime lawyer and personal friend of both Mann and Charlie Bigelow, says eventually the commission will begin to work more smoothly.

"Charlie was a past chairman of the commission and I'm not sure he's ever gotten over it," he observes. "I hope Brian will be a commissioner in his own right. There's also a maturation-in-office or a learning curve with new commissioners, and Brian has to mature.

"Frank is seasoned enough on the state and local level to understand how this works, and I don't think his own political philosophy has changed that much: He's fiscally conservative, but more socially concerned than (some other conservatives)."

These days, while the five elected commissioners wrestle over how best to manage growth and protect the quality of life in Lee — cited by each as the stickiest challenge — a sixth and invisible commissioner of sorts has joined the County board, working strongly through Bigelow and Mann. This commissioner is known as History.

The history, in short, sounds something like a sandlot football play: Mann to Goss back to Mann, and Bigelow to Bigelow.

It was Mann, now a Republican but then a prominent 1980s-era "Southern Democrat" (self-described), who recommended to Gov. Bob Graham that Sanibel city official and Republican Porter Goss fill a vacant seat on the commission, angering the local Democratic machine.

Goss would later become a U.S. Representative and then an infamously short-lived director of the C.I.A. under President George W. Bush. But he was also the first Republican environmentalist here, says Mann, who models his own approach to resource preservation and growth management on the former Congressman and top spy.

Goss worked with then-Commissioner Charlie Bigelow to help craft the first county plan that sought to restrict some development in the interests of future citizens (Bigelow resigned his seat in 1990 and spent a short time jailed for failing to pay income taxes consistently or on time).

Then in 1993, Mann himself became an appointed commissioner, so named by the original He-Coon, Gov. Chiles, to fill a seat

vacated by an elected commissioner jailed for her romantic liaisons with lobbyists competing for county contracts — Vicky Lopez-Wolfe.

The circle might be complete if Porter Goss would step back out of retirement and run again for a Lee County Commission seat. So far, he has expressed no interest in the job.

Commissioner Bigelow's view of the work completed by his father's generation is gently critical. "They gave us our first comprehensive land-use plan to rein in sprawl and it was a good first effort," he says. "But their best wasn't good enough now 20 years later. God bless 'em for trying."

But at times he appears to be a gentle critic of himself, as well.

"I think my greatest failing to date is delivery style," he admits. "What was right to deliver to voters — a clear message of change outside the county courthouse — doesn't work inside the courthouse, where talking about change is a threat. Even the word 'change' is a threat to a lot of folks in county government. This is a complex puzzle for me to work out."

His instinct, perhaps, is to work it out like his great-great grandfather Towles might have worked it out.

"He was known as 'Wild Bill' Towles," recalls Bigelow of the history. "In those days, you had to take matters into your own hands. Because he could not move the county commission to tear down the first courthouse, he decided what he would do — under cover of darkness he would dismantle the old courthouse. And he did. He oversaw the destruction of the whole thing."

But lately Bigelow may be doing the mantling, not the dismantling.

When he spoke with other commissioners at a groundbreaking for the first "green" building in Lee County at the Six Mile Cypress Slough recently, he displayed little of the combative, says Jeff Mudgett, a high school friend and architect who designed the building.

"He showed some humility and willingness to listen," Mudgett says. "In high school he was one of the greatest guys I knew, interested in the world."

Mann, meanwhile, charmed everyone at the groundbreaking with his polished storytelling and charm, Mudgett says. That's something he's always had, according to his son, Ian Mann.

"Has he changed over the years? I don't think so," he says. "When we were little and we'd go to a restaurant or somewhere, Dad couldn't walk out of a place without talking to people he knew. He left office for a while, but what's that joke about Al Gore? Now he's tan, rested and ready. He's a man who likes to help people, and his talents are suited to that."

They'd better be, because a lot of people are going to need help from forward-thinking commissioners, whether their names are old or new, says Geraghty.

"We've got 70 million baby boomers, and Florida will get a large percentage of them, and so will we in Lee County, and growth will be unimaginable. So now is the time to make plans for them." ■

WATER

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Restrictions typically run from 2 to 4 grams of sodium a day. On food labels, sodium is typically listed in milligrams. Someone on a 4-gram-a-day diet may have 4,000 milligrams a day.

"If you think of a low sodium drink, you think of things like Diet Coke, which has 100 parts-per-million," Maier said. "In comparison sport drinks tend to range from 225 to 450 parts-per-million. They have a lot more sodium. Milk has 500 parts per million. For the average person, it is not a problem."

DiPiero said customers do not need to

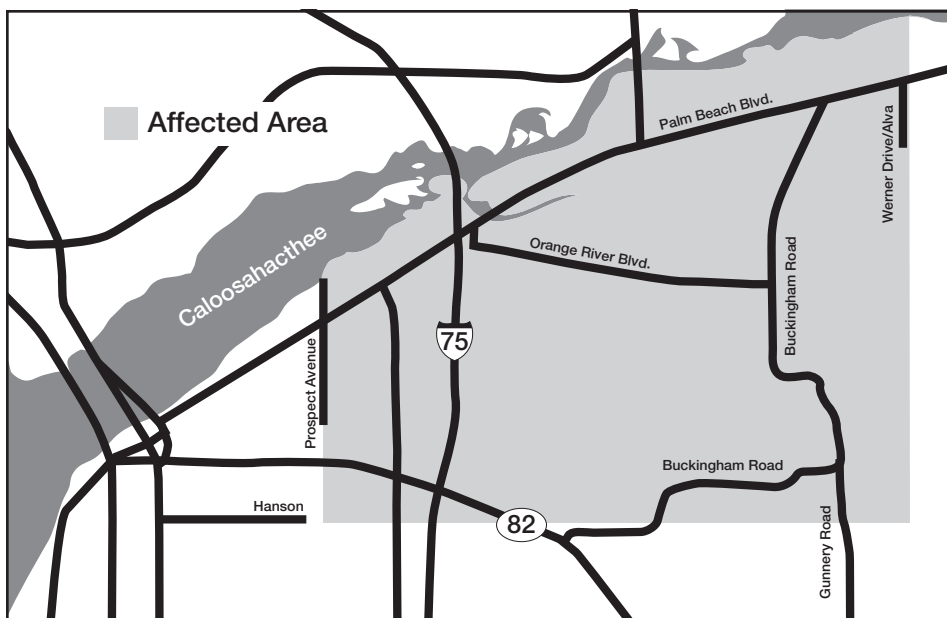
boil water or take any precautions unless they are on salt-restricted diets. Then, they should consult with their doctors.

"I haven't heard anyone tell me they are tasting a difference," said DiPiero. "I guess it depends on a person's sense of taste."

Sodium levels are typically measured once a year, but are being checked once a week while the drought continues.

Summer rains are not expected to commence until the second week of June.

"Our goal is to keep the water as safe as we can," DiPiero said. ■



Area affected by warning of high sodium content in public water supply