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Sarasota County's stormwater program ranks highest in Florida

Sarasota County beat 10 other nominees to win the 2008 Excellence Award for Stormwater Programs from the Florida Stormwater Association. The award will be presented June 13 during the association's annual conference at Sanibel Harbor Resort and Spa in Ft. Myers.

Sarasota County was commended for its appreciation of how stormwater runoff impacts every aspect of quality of life, making it unique among all operating utilities in the United States. "I often refer others to this area when people ask me what a utility should look like," said Kurt Spitzer, executive director of the Florida Stormwater Association.

The county uses a watershed management approach that examines entire watersheds in intense detail, down to the level of individual basins or sub-basins, and accepts no adverse impacts to water bodies. The result is a concentration on four major areas: flood protection, water quality, operations and maintenance and capital-improvement projects.

Sarasota County's accomplishments include real-time automated rainfall monitoring, state-of-the-art regional stormwater storage facilities and implementation of the state's first national pollutant discharge elimination system permit. The county ranks among the nation's top 5 percent in flood protection programs, earning its residents substantial flood insurance discounts. It also has undertaken major bay improvement projects, promoted low-impact development and helped pass a sweeping ordinance regulating the use of fertilizer.

"Sarasota County's stormwater program took a giant leap when it began looking at water management from a holistic point of view," said Sarasota County Commission Chair Shannon Staub. "Imaginative employees understood at an early stage that if we were to balance quality of life with growing development, we needed innovative methods for handling stormwater runoff. Other counties are really just catching up in terms of dealing with the consequences of inadequate stormwater programs."

Stormwater management in Sarasota County became a high priority during the 1980s, in response to pressures from development and the problems associated with drainage in a low-lying coastal community. At that point, the county increased regulatory activities and formed a stormwater utility. The utility is renowned for a Florida Supreme Court decision in 1996 that found the county was authorized by state statutes to establish the utility and enact a special assessment to support capital improvements and operational programs.

According to Warren Davis, the county's surface water manager, utilities should develop and implement stormwater management programs and regulations that are technically and economically feasible, provide significant environmental benefits and effective compliance with state and federal laws. "By staying on the cutting edge of stormwater management practices," said Davis, "Sarasota County is well on its way to creating cleaner waterways and beaches throughout our community."

For more information about Sarasota County's stormwater programs, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for Stormwater.