

# LOCAL & STATE

## Lee County's water rates to rise

Users can weigh in on 2 options for higher fees at June 20 hearing

**Bill Smith**  
Fort Myers News-Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Population growth and accompanying demand for water services combined with the pressures of inflation will likely mean higher water and sewer rates for customers of Lee County Utilities.

Residents who depend on Lee Utilities for water could face increases for the three or more years beginning this summer.

They have their chance to comment at a 9:30 a.m.

June 20 hearing, in the county commission chamber at the Old County Courthouse, 2120 Main St., Fort Myers.

Water rates have remained stable in Lee County since the 2014-15 budget year, with the last increase taking effect in October 2014.

### Inflation, growth drive higher utility rates

Major reasons for the pressure on water rates, according to the utility's consultant, Thierry Boveri of Rafletis Public Management Group, are inflation and growth.

"The (financial) needs of the system, combined with the inflation and the cost of operation has really driven the need for the rate option plans," he said.

"Costs are increasing. The county is fortunate to have had growth to increase those revenues over the years."

Commissioners will have two options for a water, sewer and reclaimed waste water fees:

**Option 1:** An 11.5 % increase in each of the three years from 2023 to 2025

**Option 2:** A 'tapered' increase for the years 2023 to 2026, with a 12% hike the first year, 9% the second year, 7% the third year and 5% in the fourth year, 2026.

The average water bill is \$78.64 in 2023. Either of the increases would end up with the bills topping about \$112 in 2027.

Commissioner Mike Greenwell initially asked colleagues to approve the tapered plan after other

See **WATER**, Page 5A



Alta Resources on Tuesday will unveil its new \$27.6 million building located at Skyplex on Paul J. Doherty Parkway in Fort Myers. PROVIDED BY ALTA RESOURCES

## Alta Resources' new home to be unveiled

Move to \$27M Skyplex building involves adding over 350 jobs

**Samantha Neely**  
Fort Myers News-Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Alta Resources is set to unveil its new \$27 million Skyplex building on Tuesday, ushering in an expansion to bring over 350 jobs to the Fort Myers area.

Making the move from its prior office in Gateway, the new three-story, 98,000-square-foot building has recently been completed after officials first announced the project back in 2019. While factors, such as the pandemic, supply chain, and construction

shortages, delayed the original targeted completion, Alta Resources was able to finish the building and move their workforce from their previous Gateway location.

Since establishing its Fort Myers presence in 2013, the Wisconsin-based customer-management business-process outsourcing company has thrived due to its labor force of over 7,000 full- and part-time employees and its support for its globally recognized clients, such as Stellantis and Kellogg Company.

Alta Resources CEO and chairman Jim Beré spoke to the News-Press Friday, sharing insight into the last four years as their long-awaited project was develop-

ing and what this expansion means for their company.

Here's what residents can expect from Alta Resources's upcoming expansion and move into their new Skyplex location:

### What are some highlights of this expansion and new location in Fort Myers?

Located on Paul J. Doherty Parkway, the new facility boasts a lot of upgrades and new technology, providing multiple spaces for employees to let off steam in. Features of the new office building include a new cafeteria, new kitchenettes, game rooms, outside patios, walking trails, and a sidewalk system.

Eager to debut it, Beré said the biggest highlight of the new facility is that they were able to design it to fit their organization and their workforce.

"The most important people in our organization really are the frontline individuals who are, either through chat or texting or voice, talking to the consumers of our clients and we just want to make sure we're providing them a great place to work, that they know that we really, really care about them," Beré said.

All the building stages were exciting, but Beré said it definitely felt different seeing it completed. As of recently, all employees have moved in and have expressed their excitement to finally be in the space, many trying out the fun features.

See **ALTA**, Page 6A

## Former NFL player dedicated to teaching life skills to youth

Walter Harris will host free leadership and football camp

**Erica Van Buren**  
Naples Daily News  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Retired professional football player Walter Harris will host a leadership and football camp dedicated to teaching youth about life skills on and off the field.

The free camp will kick off on May 27 at 9 a.m. at Immokalee High School, located at 701 Immokalee Drive, wrapping up at 5 pm. Middle and high school age boys are encouraged to come out. Lunch will be provided.

Walter Harris, founder of Official Pro Players, said the goal of his nonprofit is to bring professional athletes together from all sports to get involved in the community.

"I realized the importance of our platform and the influence that we all have coming from the football profession and how it can make a huge difference," said 48-year-old Harris. "Signing an autograph or showing up to an event can make a difference to a child. I've always wanted to work collectively with other professional athletes to try and better the community."

Harris spent 13 years in the National Football League (NFL). He was selected by the Chicago Bears as the 13th overall draft pick in the 1st Round of the 1996 NFL Draft. Throughout his career he played for the Chicago Bears, Indianapolis Colts, Washington Commanders, and San Francisco 49ers.

Under the Official Pro Players umbrella, Huddle 27 a mentoring initiative, was born. The all day camp

See **CAMP**, Page 6A



The Huddle 27 free football camp will kick off on May 27 at 9 a.m. at Immokalee High School located at 701 Immokalee Drive, wrapping up at 5 pm. Middle and high school age boys are encouraged to come out. Lunch will be provided. PHOTO PROVIDED

## Centers for the Arts Bonita Springs hires new director

Alyona Ushe replaces longtime leader Susan Bridges, who retired

**Charles Runnells**  
Fort Myers News-Press  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

After an extensive search, the Centers for the Arts Bonita Springs have hired a new executive director.

Alyona Ushe previously led the St. Lucie Cultural Alliance in Fort Pierce. She starts her new job in Bonita Springs on May 15.

The Centers announced the news May 3 in an email to patrons.



**Ushe**

"We are thrilled Alyona will be joining us to lead the Centers for the Arts in our commitment to enrich the lives of the community by providing opportunities for artistic expression, education and appreciation for all," board chairman Fred Weinman said in the email.

"Alyona shares our commitment and passion for the arts and brings exceptional leadership experience to our organization. The future is bright!"

Ushe has a long background in arts leadership in Virginia and Florida. She founded the Classika-Synthetic Theater in Arlington, Virginia, and the arts venue Arts Garage in Delray Beach. She also led the nonprofits Creative City Collaborative in Delray Beach and

Cultural Arts Creatives (also known as The Creatives) in Pompano Beach. In that last role, she helped open and operate the Pompano Beach Cultural Center.

"I am honored to join an organization with such a magnitude of diverse programming, a visionary Board of Directors and talented staff," Ushe said in the email, "as we usher in the Centers for the Arts' next chapter of growth and development."

### First new executive director in 24 years

Ushe replaces longtime executive director Susan

See **ARTS**, Page 5A

# Data privacy bill going to DeSantis

NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

After years of debate about the issue, Florida lawmakers Thursday passed a wide-ranging bill that supporters said would boost online data privacy.

"We are doing so much for the protection of both children and all Floridians when it comes to where our private information is going and how it's being treated and giving us some control over our digital identity again," House sponsor Fiona McFarland, R-Sarasota, told House members. "This is a really, really big deal, guys."

The bill (SB 262), which focuses on large online companies, drew heavy

lobbying throughout the legislative session. Negotiations on the details continued into Thursday, the next-to-last day of the session. The Senate voted unanimously to support the final version. The House approved it in a 110-2 vote, with Rep. Kristen Arrington, D-Kissimmee, and Rep. Angie Nixon, D-Jacksonville, dissenting.

The bill deals with issues such as targeted advertising. Among other things, McFarland said the bill would give people the right to "opt out of collection of our sensitive data, as well as any personal information that's collected like voice- or facial-recognition technology."

The bill is ready to go to Gov. Ron DeSantis.

## 6 finalists named for state Supreme Court vacancy

### Nominating commission sends list to governor

NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

Four appellate judges and two circuit judges are finalists to replace former Florida Supreme Court Justice Ricky Polston, according to a list of candidates sent to Gov. Ron DeSantis by a state nominating commission.

Four judges serving on the 6th District Court of Appeal — Chief Judge Meredith Sasso and Judges Joshua Mize, Jared Smith and John Stargel — are among the finalists selected by the Florida Supreme Court Judicial Nominating Commission. Hillsborough County Circuit Judge Thomas Palermo and 20th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Thomas McHugh also made the cut from a pool of 15 applicants, a notice

distributed Friday by nominating commission Chairman Fred Karlinsky said.

The 20th Judicial Circuit is made up of five Southwest Florida counties. Three candidates applied before an initial April 3 deadline to replace Polston, who left the Supreme Court in March and was named general counsel of the state-backed Citizens Property Insurance Corp. The nominating commission extended the application deadline to April 18 and interviewed 15 applicants this week.

Two of the initial applicants — Sasso and Palermo — are on the list of finalists submitted to DeSantis, who will make the appointment to the seven-member Supreme Court. The Republican governor has appointed four of the current justices: Chief Justice Carlos Muniz and Justices John Couriel, Jamie Grosshans and Renatha Francis.



Walter Harris, founder of Official Pro Players, said the goal of his nonprofit is to bring professional athletes together from all sports to get involved in the community. PROVIDED

## Camp

Continued from Page 3A

features an all male-lead panel discussion. Following is a lunch with professional athletes. Justin Lawler, Tennessee Titans; Orson Charles, former Cleveland Browns, and James McKnight, former Miami Dolphins, attended the camp last year.

Harris said Huddle 27 was created last year as a means to fill a void.

"Over the years I've seen an increase in the need for more male mentorship," he said. "It was placed on my heart to create this initiative. I've seen many camps over the years offering help on the field. One of the things that is truly lacking today is having male figures in the community be able to pour into them (youth) and make more of an impact in their life off the field. Our young boys are struggling right now. They're dealing with mental health issues, gang violence and so many other issues because of the lack of a male presence."

Harris said timing places an important role in mentoring youth.

"We have to reach them at an early age," said Harris. "If we can get them early, we believe that our young boys will be a lot stronger and healthier mentally. They will also be able to help better

**"We have to reach them at an early age."**

**Walter Harris**

Retired NFL player and founder of nonprofit Official Pro Players

our communities."

Joe North, managing partner of The North Law Firm in Fort Myers, is listed on the roster to speak.

"I was thrilled that Walter Harris asked me to speak at the camp," said North. "He's doing a great job teaching kids how to navigate life on and off the field. I'm glad to be a part of it. Last year I spoke about the importance of having the right people in your huddle. Who you have in your huddle is very important, not just in terms of teammates. Having the right family, friends, mentors and people who can teach you as well as you teaching them is important."

For more information on how to volunteer or on the football camp visit the website <https://huddle27.com/>

*Erica Van Buren is the underserved communities reporter for The News-Press and Naples Daily News, part of the USA TODAY Network. Connect with her at [EVanBuren@gannett.com](mailto:EVanBuren@gannett.com) or on Twitter: @EricaVanBuren32*

## Alta

Continued from Page 3A

"It really made you feel like all this effort and work that we took to put it together was really worth it and seeing the people in there ... that's when it was like wow, this is real," Beré said.

### What have the past four years looked like for you and your team?

"Other than being the most tumultuous years in Florida, it was no big deal," Beré joked.

Running out of space, the original plan was to do an expansion five years ago. Alta Resources then revealed their well-kept plans for a multimillion-dollar building at Skyplex around the busy Southwest Florida International Airport in April 2019.

"It was built to be an expansion but even in that context, we wanted this to be the best building that we had, so it was going to be an improvement from any of the facilities that we had anywhere in the United States or other countries that we have a workforce."

They started breaking ground and planning for their dream facility, then came March 2020.

"The pandemic was absolutely ... I mean, it was really amazing and that was also a great testament to our workforce. Basically in a matter of weeks, we had to send every single person home. We were so fortunate, we had a technology system that really enabled us to use a centralized system that we could take that work out, but we needed computers for everybody. We needed laptops, we needed the technology and to watch how they adapted and then our clients ... some clients' world slowed down but other clients picked up in the context of it."

Throughout the pandemic, they were open for business and available. Beré applauds the work of his employees, as well as the entirety of Southwest Florida, during this time.

He also recalls how the pandemic slowed down the timetable, taking longer to get permits and materials.

"The whole world was just kind of upside down, so all the things that everybody experienced, we experienced that too so it did take significantly longer than we thought it would take to build (the new building)," Beré said "Then we had supply chain issues that were starting to show up. Then as we're getting close to the finish line, Ian comes along. I can't imagine more things that kind of

were thrown in our way, but at the end of the day, we persisted and we're opening this building and we are really, really excited about it."

While the path from design to building to completion was rocky, Beré says it also speaks for all of Southwest Florida and what the last four years have taught everyone. While highlighting his own employees efforts, he also mentioned how residents have rallied to help each other and show resilience in the face of adversity.

### How will this new expansion bring new jobs?

Alta Resources is seeking roughly 350-400 new employees during its expansion.

They currently have 8,000 employees worldwide, with about 700 in the Fort Myers location. Approximately half of those employees work remotely and the other half choose to come into the office.

Beré said it reflects the growth as an organization. For example, suddenly one of the company's clients may double the size of their business. So what may have started as a need for 100 people will shoot up all of sudden to 200 or 300 people, Beré said, adding that how that need goes up is really dependent upon the results that Alta produces for them.

"We're doing a great job caring for their customers and helping them build their businesses and these are some of the largest companies in the world that we're working for," Beré said.

Some of the roles they are looking to hire are:

- Frontline workers.
- IT jobs.
- Leadership roles.

"That's probably the biggest need is what we would call our frontline, those individuals who are really answering those calls or we work with social media a lot. We monitor social media for some of our clients and it's up to people working on that," Beré said. "Then what also comes up is that when we grow, there are leadership positions, there are team leader positions."

### Does the current worker shortage worry the company?

The current worker shortage has been on Beré's mind as the expansion occurs. However, he shares that compared to some of their other sites, it hasn't been a problem to attract enough people to their Fort Myers site.

Moving forward, they aim to be more

flexible and, unlike other jobs that are solely work from home, they provide hands-on training.

"Our model really is we will use our facility and we have great training rooms, we invest a lot of money on that. So we want to train people as a team, so they get to know each other, they get to know their leaders, they get to understand the products," Beré said. "Some may choose to say I want to continue working in the facility, other people may say I'd like to work from home."

He said they realize they need to be competitive in the marketplace, needing it to be a great place to work and a place where people feel like they belong.

"It needs to be a place where they feel they want to move up in their career, that there are opportunities," Beré said. "If we can create that and do that right, our belief is we will get enough people and we're optimistic about it."

### In total, how much was the new building?

The new Skyplex building cost \$27.6 million.

### What are your upcoming goals with this expansion and new building?

Following their official grand opening to the public, Beré laid out his upcoming goals with this new era:

- Continue addressing the needs of clients.
- Finding the right people to do this work.
- Grow and create more jobs within the marketplace.

In addressing clients' needs and asks, he shared that accomplishing those tasks as a team is fundamental to the company.

"If we can take care of customers, let them know that they're important, and help them answer their needs in the context of the way these large corporations want them done, it becomes very personal," Beré said. "That's the first objective that we need to do."

Their second objective is to find the right people who want to do this kind of work, Beré stresses that they want employees to enjoy what they do and are eager to form connections. Sticking to their hybrid environment post-pandemic, officials encourage those to connect and find common interests with others in the office.

Building off of a positive workforce, their third goal strives to grow and create more jobs in the marketplace. Beré said they want to continue to be a com-

pany where people are attracted to work there and employees recommend them to loved ones.

"We take care of our the people in the organization, make sure that they're healthy, and we're helping them develop and train and learn new things and they feel part of something," Beré said. "And then third, our hope is that we would continue to grow the business in the Fort Myers area."

### How will this bring Lee County to a whole other level of business and development?

"I'm a big believer in economic development. I think if we can truly create jobs in the area and allow people to work their way up and get into different roles but have jobs they like to do, that's always healthy for every organization."

Beré discussed his hope for creating more jobs for the Southwest Florida region and setting a pattern for the way companies work, which he admits is still hard to truly figure out post-pandemic. While Alta Resources has slowly started to solve the puzzle, they are adding another piece every day and getting new answers to see what fits.

A big game-changer for them has been open communication.

"We've got a guiding principle around communication and a lot of people think communication is going to be telling you or communicating to you. The most important part about that communication is that we as leaders are listening," Beré said. "We need to listen to the people that are part of our organization and what are their needs and what they want. I think we can be a model that in Southwest Florida, in Fort Myers."

They also have plans to continue to grow their site in Southwest Florida, however, they don't know what that looks like time-wise or if that means more facilities in the future.

Lastly, they are striving to give back more to the community they have been a part of for the past decade, already partnering with United Way so far. Beré said if they are growing, they have more opportunities to become engaged in nonprofits and organizations.

"We'd like to see our people involved in the organization, involved in different nonprofits, and what they do is unbelievable, just the stories of what people have done and they really want to make a difference," he said. "When you're growing and you have a group of people say that we want to give back, we want to make this a better place to live and for us to be part of that would be a real privilege."