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Everglades restoration plan is sweet and sour

05/19/2009
Orlando Sentinel - Online
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We now are in the third remake of a plan to save the nation's most imperiled swamp.

It's a smaller version of a smaller version of a grandiose plan announced by Charlie Crist last June.

Charlie says it's still plenty big, just not as big.

Originally, he was going to pay a whopping $1.7 billion to buy 290 square miles of former swamp land that was drained long ago to make farm land.

The idea is to return it to the swamp.

But that price tag was just too big a chicken bone to swallow.

So in November the plan was scaled down to $1.3 billion, which was still too big.

And so the deal was downsized again in April to $536 million for 114 square miles.

At this rate, by next year we'll be down to $5,000 for a barn and 2 acres.

Call it a recessionary reality check.

Also call it keeping the deal alive.

The new plan does not abandon the old plan. It simply stretches it out, buying some land now and taking options out to buy the rest later.

If all goes well, the state would own all the land Charlie originally wanted to buy within 10 years — preferably within three years to get the best price — after the deal closes.

It depends on the economy and how many Benjamins the federal government prints up for Everglades restoration.

Call it the Everglades Leap of Faith plan.

It's a pretty big leap. The 114 square miles to be purchased is not one big chunk of strategically located property ready to be handed over to the alligators. It consists of several smaller parcels scattered throughout South Florida.

Some would be very valuable for restoration plans.

And some would not, most notably 15,000 acres of citrus groves that U.S. Sugar wants to unload because it wants out of the citrus business. The state doesn't want the groves either, but has agreed to take them off U.S. Sugar's hands to get the deal done.

We are buying land we don't need from U.S. Sugar and not buying a lot of land we do need.

Lest you be surprised by this, remember that the state always plays the sap in any deal with Big Sugar. The grower's trump card is that it fully understands the political ramifications of restoration and exploits them. Count on the Everglades figuring prominently in Charlie Crist's campaign for U. S. Senate. Count on environmentalists giving him one, big greenie hug.

But as he has with many of his other initiatives, Crist will take the accolades and leave the heavy lifting to whoever succeeds him in 2011.

That unfortunate person will have to come up with more than $1 billion to buy the rest of the farm. And he or she will have less than three years to do so if the state wants to buy it at the current locked-in price.

After that, the state would have to get new appraisals, or match any offer made by a private buyer. Either scenario could put the price out of reach.

The state also has to wheel and deal with other growers, swapping and selling land to get the best configuration possible for the restoration plan. Like U.S. Sugar, these other growers understand the state's desperation and take advantage of it.

I am afraid that abuse of taxpayers is the price we pay in dealing with Big Sugar.

Without this land, there will be no Everglades restoration. The swamp is dying from a lack of space to store and clean water. This is the first major initiative to resolve what has been a fundamental, fatal flaw in every previous restoration plan.

I have seen what is possible. At one time, the massive Everglades-like swamp that makes up the headwaters of the St. Johns River was dying from a lack of land. Like the Everglades, it had been carved up into farms.

And then thousands of acres in Brevard and Indian River counties were converted to reservoirs and swamps, creating world-class bass fishing lakes and marshes thick with ducks and wading birds. The public now flocks to these wildlife areas, creating an economic boom for the region.

The price paid for the land was high, but nobody questions the deal now.

It is a forever investment.

And it is worth making in the Everglades.

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Water Managers Approve $533M Everglades Deal

05/19/2009
Native American Times

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) – South Florida water managers approved Gov. Charlie Crist's deal Wednesday to pay U.S. Sugar Corp. $536 million for 73,000 acres of farmland for Everglades restoration.

The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board voted 6-1 in the final step of the deal, which has until June 2010 to close. U.S. Sugar's board of directors approved the deal last week.

"Benefits of this acquisition to the Everglades and Florida's coastal estuaries are immense, providing us the opportunity to restore a unique and treasured ecosystem in ways not previously envisioned," said Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann in a prepared statement.

U.S. Sugar is the nation's largest cane sugar producer and owns a vast amount of land between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. The goal of the land purchase is to convert farm land into conservation land, allowing water managers to create a natural system to clean and store water before it flows south into the Everglades, sometimes referred to as the River of Grass. The acreage covered by the deal represents a land mass nearly twice the size of Orlando and is the largest single acquisition of land in the district's history.

Still, the scope of the land deal has been twice trimmed since Crist's June 2008 proposal to buy out U.S. Sugar and all its assets for $1.75 billion. The deal approved Wednesday includes less than half the company's farmland but includes options to purchase the remaining 107,000 acres within the next decade.

"By gaining access to hundreds of square miles of prime property, the River of Grass and the wildlife that depend on it face a brighter and more secure future," Crist said in a prepared statement.

Not everyone is happy about the deal. Florida Crystals, the state's second largest sugar producer, has filed a lawsuit to stop the purchase. The company claims part of the deal gives an unfair business advantage to its competitor.

The Miccosukee Tribe, which controls land in the Everglades, has joined Florida Crystals' suit. Attorney Claudio Riedi told The Palm Beach Post that the deal would saddle the district with debt and delay the construction of restoration projects for decades.

The case could ultimately go to the Florida Supreme Court. Butte county appeals judge's tribal casino ruling.

Tallahassee Lobbyists Rake in Big Bucks

05/19/2009
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Four lobbying firms – the ones you would expect – pulled in more than $1 million each for lobbying the Legislature in the first quarter of 2009, newly released disclosure forms show.

Ron Book, GrayRobinson, Smith & Ballard and Southern Strategy Group were the top money earners on the Fourth Floor during this year's first quarter – which ended halfway through the legislative session. The disclosure forms were due to the Legislature by midnight Friday.

Another nine lobbying firms reported compensation above a half million dollars for legislative lobbying in the quarter.

Compensation reports don't show which firm made the most because lobbyists are only required to report their compensation in broad categories. The top category in the most recent reports is $1 million or more. The next category down is $500,000 to $999,999. Some firms report single amounts anyway, however.

While Book, GrayRobinson, Smith & Ballard and Southern Strategy Group led the overall money chase, the kings of the big paying clients may have been two firms that earned less than $1 million.

The firm Fowler White Boggs, led by lobbying legend J.M. "Mac" Stipanovich, Jim Magill and Kimberly McGlynn, had two clients, AT&T and U.S. Sugar, that paid slightly more than $100,000 each during the three month period. Fowler White also earned $62,000 from Health Management Systems.

And construction design giant HNTB Corp paid the Foley & Lardner firm $143,000. HNTB is currently involved in a host of road projects including the Florida Turnpike and I-4 expansion.

Among the $1 million earners for the quarter, Book had the most large clients. His biggest client was Gold Giant Internet LLC ("Turn Your Gold Into Cash"), which sent Book $75,000 of that former gold.

Another of Book's clients, Midwestern farming concern The Lawrence Group, based in Nashville, Tenn., paid his firm at least $60,000. The Lawrence Group's interests in Florida included the effort to undo the South Florida Water Management deal to buy U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration. The Lawrence Group was a rival bidder for the land.

Miami-Dade County paid Book $62,500.

Book also had at least three clients who paid him more than $50,000 in the quarter – Florida Power & Light, the Florida Heart Research Institute, and the West Flagler Kennel Club – and several $30,000-plus and $40,000-plus clients.

Southern Strategy and GrayRobinson, by contrast, made much of their money by spreading out among several clients who paid much less.

Southern Strategy, with a stable of lobbying heavyweights like Paul Bradshaw, Steve Madden, Chris Dudley, Paul Mitchell, John Thrasher and David Rancourt, had only one client paying more than $30,000, the Florida Hospital Association.

GrayRobinson also relied on breadth to bring in its million. The firm, whose lobbyists include Pete Antonacci, George Meros, and Fred Leonhardt, did get more than $40,000 from Dosal Tobacco Corp., which used its advocates to avoid being added to the state's tobacco settlement.

The firm had a few other large clients, including the Florida Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association, which was unable to kill the cigarette tax increase.

Nine firms reported compensation between $500,000 and $1 million.

Those firms, along with their principal lobbyist listed on their disclosure report were:

-Capital City Consulting; Gerald Wester.
-Colodny, Fass, Talenfeld, Karlinsky and Abate; Michael Colodny.
-Dutko Worldwide; Van Poole.

-Floridian Partners; Charlie Dudley.
-Foley and Lardner; Thomas Maida.
-Fowler, White, Boggs; John "Mac" Stipanovich.
-Greenberg Traurig; Fred Baggett.
-Johnson and Blanton; Jon Johnson.
-Pennington, Moore, Wilkinson, Bell and Dunbar; Gene Adams.

Capital City Consulting, whose lobbyists also include Nicholas Iarossi, Ronald LaFace and Patricia O'Connell listed as its biggest paying client Allied Veterans of the World, which paid the firm at least $40,000.

Dutko Worldwide's biggest paying clients was Coventry Health Care of Washington, D.C., which paid the firm more than $20,000.

Floridian Partners biggest client was Florida Power & Light, which paid the firm $65,000.

In addition to HNTB, Foley & Lardner counted Lo Land Assets, a California land bank that deals in foreclosures, among its major clients, and WRB Enterprises, a Tampa company that operates electric utilities on several Caribbean islands, and has desalination, real estate and banking interests.

Greenberg Traurig PA's 's top client, Cash4Gold, shelled out $50,000.

Johnson & Blanton – Jon Johnson, Travis Blanton and Amy Christian – counted Florida Hospital as their biggest client. The hospital paid the firm $63,000 in the quarter, the records show.

Pennington Moore, whose lobbyists include Mark Delegal, Pete Dunbar, Doug Bell, Sam Bell and Ramon Safley, had three clients that paid at least $40,000: Professional Staffing A.B.T.S., Progressive Insurance, and the Safety Net Hospital Alliance.