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Total Clips: 2

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MINING DEAL MAY COST STATE

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Secrecy could add to the steep cost of Florida's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar.

While state water managers held closed-door talks with U.S. Sugar about buying the company's 187,000 acres, Palm Beach County in April approved a U.S. Sugar plan for rock mining right in the middle of the area targeted for Everglades restoration.

The mining approval likely boosted the value of those 7,000 acres, according to appraisers. That could mean taxpayers will end up paying more for a big piece of the buyout, proposed to re-establish water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Sugar cane land in that area appraises for about \$3,400 to \$5,500 an acre, compared with up to \$11,000 an acre for rock mines, according to the Palm Beach County Property Appraiser's Office.

The county spent months asking the South Florida Water Management District if mines proposed on U.S. Sugar land and elsewhere in the Everglades Agricultural Area affected restoration plans. But the district never put up a red flag and didn't disclose the possibility of the U.S. Sugar deal, officials said.

"None of us knew anything about it," County Commissioner Burt Aaronson said about the buyout, which was announced in June. "Now they bring up this U.S. Sugar deal. . . . It's very confusing to the public and to elected officials."

U.S. Sugar already agreed to lease the land to Florida Rock Industries to mine the property. If the U.S. Sugar buyout goes through, that leaves taxpayers to deal with a tenant not necessarily interested in moving, Florida Rock attorney Alan Ciklin said.

Florida Rock learned about the state's proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar by reading the newspaper after the deal was announced, Ciklin said. The company is still pursuing state permits needed to start digging.

"Florida Rock has a long-term lease with U.S. Sugar," Ciklin said. "As far as we are concerned [the buyout] doesn't affect it at all."

District officials, citing the ongoing negotiations, would not comment on how the mining approvals could affect the deal.

At the time of the County Commission's April vote on the mining proposal, the talks with U.S. Sugar were just "exploratory" and it would have been premature to suggest that the county or any government "modify their actions," district spokesman Randy Smith said.

However, even if the U.S. Sugar buyout proposal had been further along, district policy is to stay out of city and county land-use decisions, agency board member Shannon Estenoz said.

Gov. Charlie Crist last fall started talks with U.S. Sugar about a buyout to move the sugar giant out of the way of Everglades restoration. The district's top administrators joined the discussions in March, agency attorney Sheryl Wood said.

Talks continued into June, but the buyout was just considered a "concept" until about a week before the governor announced the deal on June 24, Estenoz said.

The district and U.S. Sugar are negotiating a contract proposal, due in September, with the goal of closing on the deal by Nov. 30. The district plans to borrow money to pay for the U.S. Sugar deal and pay off the debt with property taxes.

U.S. Sugar two years ago turned to rock mining to diversify its operations

The county in 2006 approved plans for Stewart Mining Industries to harvest rock from about 4,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land east of Lake Okeechobee. This year, the county approved three more mines in the Everglades Agricultural Area, including the 7,000-acre Lake Harbor Quarry proposed on U.S. Sugar land south of the lake.

Location and the income produced by the land determine the value of agricultural property, said Tom Barnhart, director of appraisal services for the county Property Appraiser's Office.

Agricultural land gains more value when it has approval for other uses, such as residential development or rock mining - how much value depends on market demand, he said.

Location and market conditions are a factor, but land approved for mining or development would be "much more valuable" than sugar cane land, said Sharon Outland, president of the Florida Association of Property Appraisers.

U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert Coker said, with negotiations ongoing, he wouldn't comment on how the mining approvals affect the cost of the buyout. He also wouldn't say why U.S. Sugar did not delay the 7,000-acre mining proposal while

negotiating to sell the land.

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Three Republicans seek nod in the 16th Congressional District race

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A trio of Republicans are running hard to the right to become their party's standard-bearer to avenge the 2006 lose of Florida's 16th District in Congress.

State Rep. Gayle Harrell of Stuart, investment banker and former Palm Beach Gardens Council member Hal Valeche and Tom Rooney, an attorney from Tequesta, have made freshman Congressman Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, a focus of their campaigns in the Republican leaning district.

Mahoney took the seat two years ago, after suggestive text messages to a teenager ended the political career of Rep. Mark Foley weeks before the election.

The three Republicans are currently closely aligned on most issues involving the war on terrorism, energy, illegal immigration, and social programs.

Meanwhile, they have had no qualms about pointing out 'facts' about each other: Rooney gave money to a Democrat running for Congress two years ago and has financially benefited from family interests in owning the Palm Beach Kennel Club;

Valeche, while decrying gambling, had included Harrah's Entertainment in his investment portfolio;

Harrell, while proudly waiving her voting record in the state House on abortion, has been listed as recently as a year ago on politico.com as being pro-choice.

For voters trying to decide, Harrell says where they differ in experience.

As an elected official, she has the most of it, even beyond her eight years in the state House. 'I believe I have demonstrated that with 37 years of commitment to this community,' Harrell said. 'I believe 37 years of it, whether as a teacher in the Martin County School District, as a health-care administrator and at the legislative level or as a community leader as a founder of Hibiscus Community Center.' Valeche says he also has experience, but as 25 years as a New York investment banker, along with his Navy combat service, his are more practical for what the nation is now facing. 'Clearly a lot of the problems we face as a nation are

economic,' Valeche said. 'I served in Vietnam, proudly, and I think my understanding of military operations and combat situations also trumps the other two candidates.' Rooney, a grandson of legendary Pittsburgh Steelers founder Art Rooney Sr., points to his services in the U.S. Army as a prosecutor for the U.S. Attorney's office, two years as an instructor of law at the United State Military Academy at West Point, and his two years as CEO of a shelter for abused children in West Palm Beach, have given him insight into the needs of people in the district and the ability to question military leaders in the war on terrorism. 'I'm not just going up there to cozy up to K-Street lobbyists,' Rooney said. 'I think my job as a citizen legislator is to service and return home after around eight years and say I made a difference in the world and my the lives of my children that much better.' Gayle Harrell

Age: 65

Residence: Stuart

Occupation: State House Representative

Key endorsements: State Senate President Sen. Ken Pruitt, Carol Jean Jordan former Florida Republican chairwoman, Sun-Sentinel

Family: husband James, three daughters, one son, four grandchildren

Tom Rooney

Age: 37

Residence: Tequesta

Occupation: attorney

Key endorsements: former Rep. Joe Negron; Vets for Freedom; PBA Martin County; House Conservative Fund; Redstate.com, Palm Beach Post, Highlands Today

Family: Wife Tara, three sons

Hal Valeche

Age: 59

Residence: Palm Beach Gardens

Occupation: Investment Manager, Davit Development, LLC

Key endorsements: Eagle Forum; Admiral Jay L. Johnson, former Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers

Family: wife Stephanie, one daughter

CANDIDATES ON THE ISSUES

Energy

Harrell: We must develop a comprehensive energy policy that is pro production, pro incentive and pro nuclear. I support opening new oil fields in areas where resources have already been identified; in (Alaska National Wildlife Refuge), western North and South Dakota and eastern Montana and off the coast of Florida. I

would change federal law to give all states with offshore oil and gas, including Florida, the same share of federal royalties Wyoming gets for land-based resources (48 percent).

Rooney: Under my plan to reduce energy prices I support allowing each state to determine its own fate when it comes to producing oil and natural gas. Additionally, we must expand our refining capacity. Eventually, we must turn to alternative forms of energy such as nuclear, solar and wind.

Valeche: I believe one of the most helpful things we can do right now is to resuscitate the nuclear power industry. We need to drill for and refine more oil domestically. I support drilling in ANWR, off the coast of Florida, on the Outer Continental Shelf and on other federal lands. We can conduct this drilling in an environmentally sensitive manner. There is no reason that oil rigs need to be any closer than 50 miles from Florida's coasts, and we should also be utilizing directional drilling whenever possible. I believe we should be providing incentives to private industry for further development of alternative energy sources. I like Sen. McCain's idea of awarding a large prize for the development of an advanced car battery.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Harrell: America is engaged in a war that we did not start, but for the security of our country, it is a war we must now win. Our country and our very existence is threatened by Radical Islam. I am focused on winning the War on Terror, not on creating artificial timelines for the United States and their allies to surrender to the terrorists. I support the surge in Iraq and am very pleased to see it working. Both the Iraq military and government are making great progress and I look forward to the day that we have a democracy at work in Iraq. I believe that we must also win the war on terror in Afghanistan. It may be time to consider a Surge in Afghanistan to ensure that we defeat al-Qaeda and drive them from the Afghani-Pakistan border.

Rooney: Under General Petraeus' leadership, the Coalition and Iraqi forces have been able to stabilize the country enough for the Iraqi government to begin taking control. The Global War on Terror will only be won when the enemy understands they cannot achieve their goals. Any strategy employed to defeat the enemy in this war must include an overwhelming force. Part of the strategy in this struggle should also include continued re-examination of the Rules of Engagement in insurgency warfare and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. As a signatory of the Geneva Convention and a country based on the Rule of Law, I do not believe the United States should stoop to the level of the terrorist. However, there is enough room for consideration of 'adjusting fire' when faced with a non-conventional enemy.

Valeche: Iraq and Afghanistan are the current battlefields in the War on Terror. I believe the surge strategy implemented by General Petraeus has been a major success. I believe we are within sight of achieving our original objectives in Iraq. The Iraqi government is taking over more security responsibilities and is functioning more like a democracy. I am heartened that the Sunni minority has agreed to participate in the next round of parliamentary elections. I believe we need to continue our current policies and slowly reduce the number of troops serving in Iraq. I am concerned that our recent successes in Iraq have worsened

the situation in Afghanistan. I believe we were absolutely correct in engaging in Afghanistan in 2001. It was necessary to demonstrate to the world community that any government which harbored and encouraged terrorists acting against the United States would bear the consequences. However, now that al-Qaeda has failed in Iraq, I believe they are re-focusing on Afghanistan. As we are able to reduce our commitment in Iraq, there will be the opportunity to re-deploy troops to Afghanistan to confront the new threat. However, I believe our Army and Marine ground forces have been over-utilized, and we cannot ask them to continue to deploy over and over again. I believe that until we are able to declare that Afghanistan is secure and al-Qaeda has been routed from the Afghani-Pakistan border region, we need to increase the number of ground forces we have at our disposal. I believe that ultimately the way that we do this is to increase the benefits available to members of an all-volunteer force.

Illegal immigration

Harrell: I say no to amnesty and oppose Social Security or other benefits for illegal aliens. I have been a leader in the Florida Legislature to assure that Florida does not provide taxpayer-funded benefits to illegals and sponsored the Florida Safe Borders Act to make sure that Florida is doing everything it can to stop illegal immigration. Any discussion of a guest worker program for those already here illegally should begin only after our border is secure. At that point I support a biometrically secure ID card for guest workers.

Rooney: We are a country based on the Rule of Law. Ignoring our laws only encourages more illegal behavior. Additionally, we jeopardize the foundations of the Republic. Only when the existing laws are enforced can we then entertain some kind of worker program. Amnesty (or probation) is not an option in my opinion because it makes a mockery of the thousands of immigrants who enter this country legally each year. Guest workers should get no preferential treatment in obtaining their citizenship.

Valeche: We need to finish building the 700-mile security fence authorized by Congress, and then start thinking about how we secure the rest of the border. I am opposed to amnesty, entitlement programs, and in-state tuition for illegal immigrants. I believe we need a tamper-proof ID card so that employers can more easily verify whether or not they are hiring a legal worker. Further, we have to reform the bureaucracy at USCIS so that employers who need temporary workers can get them legally.

Everglades, St. Lucie and Indian River estuaries

Harrell: I support the purchase of U.S. Sugar lands to establish a flow way from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. This is the first step in controlling the flow and filtering of water, and replenishing the Everglades rather than dumping it into our local rivers and estuaries. However, I do have some concern that local projects such as the construction of the C 44 project will be delayed or reduced as resources become stretched to fund the purchase. As a candidate for Congress, I believe the federal government must contribute its share for the restoration efforts.

Rooney: Now is the time for the Federal government to step up and deliver on its obligation. The latest news of the possible land deal bringing the 'missing link' on board in delivering water south

from the lake into the Everglades could greatly change the future of recovery efforts. The fact is, the Indian River Lagoon - South Project will still need to be built in that it is designed primarily to accommodate basin run off.

Valeche: I believe the plan announced by the SFWMD is a very good starting point in solving the problems of the Everglades and the St. Lucie and Indian River estuaries. The details of the land swaps which must take place in order to establish a true flow-way from the Lake to the southern Everglades are crucial and we won't really know if this land purchase is a significant solution until we see the final deal. The damage done to the St. Lucie Estuary as a result of large fresh water releases from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie Canal can possibly be reversed, but only if we act promptly and decisively.

Economic development

Harrell: Business flourishes when they are not burdened with high taxes and over regulation. I believe in cutting taxes and eliminating red tape for businesses and have done this at the state level as a Member of the Florida House of Representatives. I have cut over \$28 in taxes and eliminated the intangibles tax.

Rooney: At the federal level, priorities such as ensuring Florida has a sound infrastructure will be key to attracting new and retaining existing businesses. Having the infrastructure to support the transportation needs of a workforce and shipment of goods is only one many criteria companies consider when choosing where to locate.

Valeche: In order to spur economic growth in Florida and across the nation we need pro-growth tax policy, a more simple tax code, and less burdensome government regulation.

For more on the candidates views on these positions and other topics, go to: <http://www.tcpalmaskthecandidates.com/race.php?id=39>

FLORIDA'S 16TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT " The seven-county district stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, going across the top of Lake Okeechobee. Counties included in the district include Charlotte, Glades, Hendry, Highlands, Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin, and Palm Beach counties, with the bulk of voters in the later three counties. " The district had been in Republican hands since 1992, when Tom Lewis won the seat, through Mark Foley's resignation in 2006. " Of the 475,000 registered voters in the district, 42 percent are Republican, 36 Democrat and 18 percent are listed with no party. In 2004, the percentages were 43 Republican, 36 Democrat and 17 independent.

