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Fix was in for U.S. Sugar deal

By [Randy Schultz](#)

Palm Beach Post Editor of the Editorial Page

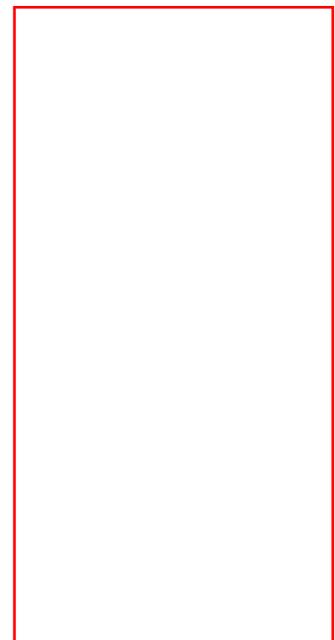
Sunday, December 21, 2008

Few politicians do the aw-shucks look as convincingly as Gov. Crist. Last week, though, showed the calculating side of the governor who's looking beyond Tallahassee.

Driving west across Florida along State Road 80, you leave the suburbs at 20-Mile Bend just past Lion Country Safari. For the next 70 miles or so, until you're well past the small town of LaBelle, there might be 50,000 people and even fewer voters. When it comes to statewide politics, they don't matter. They are no one's key voting bloc.

The governor intends to sacrifice those people, if it comes to that, in the name of Everglades restoration. They are the small farmers and the business people whose customers are farmers or others in agriculture. Some in Florida would call it a fair trade, or better. They would say - I've heard them say it - that farming has damaged the Everglades for more than a century, and now it's time to rebalance things in favor of nature.

You saw that divide last Tuesday, when the South Florida Water Management District board debated and finally approved the





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purchase of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres and the eventual end of the company whose 1,700 jobs have sustained its hometown of Clewiston since the 1930s. Representatives of environmental groups spoke in the abstract about a wonderful idea for the state, which it is. The people from Clewiston, along that stretch of State Road 80, spoke in real terms about a threat to their way of life, which it is.

Tuesday should have been a wonderful moment. The board should have approved a deal that made the public pay a fair price for the land. The water district should have presented a plan finally to preserve what remains of the original Everglades. The governor's office should have explained how he will help the people who live along State Road 80 move to a new economy.

Instead, the water district board approved - subject to a few conditions - a \$1.34 billion deal that made the public overpay for the land. A plan for how the district will use the land may be two years away. And the governor's office is treating the desperate people along State Road 80 like children - to be seen, but not heard. "We've been patted on the head for so long," Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness said Thursday, "that we all say we're bald. We don't have any hair anymore."

Mayor Chamness now realizes, like the many others from Clewiston who pleaded with the board to delay or change the deal with U.S. Sugar, that they don't matter. Gov. Crist wanted this deal badly, in part because it could save what's left of the Everglades and in part because he could claim to have made environmental history by trying to save what's left of the Everglades. That looks good if you run for president.

How stacked was the deck against the people along State Road 80?

The water district is buying U.S. Sugar's land. But the lead negotiator wasn't someone from the water district. It was Michael Sole, whom Gov. Crist named to be secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection. Representing U.S. Sugar in the contract talks was Gunster Yoakley & Stewart; the law firm's chairman is Gov. Crist's former chief of staff. Gov. Crist appointed six of the seven water district board members deciding on the sale. Gov. Crist lobbied them into Tuesday.

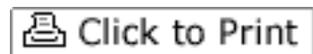
The deal passed only 4-3. One board member had recused himself. Gov. Crist had not filled the seat that represents the people along State Road 80. Melissa Meeker sounded as though she was going to vote no up until she voted yes. Jerry Montgomery cast the deciding vote, then said it was time to get a better deal. As for Gov. Crist, "God bless the four," he said. "And Godspeed to the three ... I look forward to their enlightenment."

If the deal leads to Everglades restoration, it will be a great thing for Florida. But such a massive change in state policy should account for the people who get hurt. Gov. Crist did not account for the people along State Road 80. Like most of those who live on either coast, he sees them through the windshield.

Randy Schultz is the editor of the editorial page of The Palm Beach Post. His e-mail address is schultz@pbpost.com

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