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## County criticizes secrecy of Everglades land deal

01/14/2009

Sun Sentinel - West Palm Beach Bureau  
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Secrecy over the state's proposed \$1.34 billion land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. drew a sharp rebuke from Palm Beach County officials Tuesday.

County commissioners criticized the South Florida Water Management District for failing to mention plans to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar before commissioners in April approved rock mining plans for 7,000 acres of the property.

In addition to creating a potential obstacle to using the land for Everglades restoration, the mining approval raised the value of the deal, which would be the largest land buy in state history.

The district stayed quiet about the talks with U.S. Sugar and "hung us out to dry," County Commissioner Burt Aaronson said.

"They let a lot of things go through that now we are going to pay the price for," Aaronson said.

Outside appraisers hired by the district estimate that the value of most of U.S. Sugar's cane fields range from \$4,500 to \$7,500 per acre.

However, the values of more than 12,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land approved for mining range from \$20,000 to \$27,500 per acre, according to the appraisers.

"We increased the value of real estate," Commissioner Jess Santamaria said. "Our taxpayers are burdened with the increased

value."

The district recently created a team intended to help iron out issues with local governments.

But long-stalled water permits needed to open a new golf course at the South County Recreational Park show that the district still has a long way to go in its bid to foster cooperation, County Administrator Bob Weisman said.

"This has been a one-sided relationship," Weisman said.

District spokesman Randy Smith said he would have to learn more about the county's concerns before he could comment.

District officials have said they couldn't tell commissioners about U.S. Sugar because the land buy at that point was still just a possibility.

Gov. Charlie Crist in June announced the plans to buy U.S. Sugar's land and use it to reconnect Lake Okeechobee water flows to what remains of the Everglades.

The district approved the contract last month and the deal is to close by September if the district secures financing.

For the deal to move forward, U.S. Sugar must also dispose of its lease with Florida Rock Industries to mine the 7,000 acres.

Florida Rock has filed suit against U.S. Sugar, trying to preserve its lease.

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## Dump the landfill politics

01/14/2009

Palm Beach Post

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The effort to pick Palm Beach County's next landfill seemed simple enough.

It started with three competing sites. A committee ranked one highest. Commissioners set aside today, after a two-month delay, to pick a site and begin negotiations. What looked simple, though, has become complicated.

The commission has yet to formally abandon its existing site: 1,600 acres next to the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge. The second-place bidder, Hundley Farms, filed an unsuccessful protest. The third-place finisher, sugar grower Florida Crystals, offered a different site when the company's first one had no chance. Wellington and Royal Palm Beach protest that no one is listening to them.

To complicate matters, the South Florida Water Management District announced in June, three months after the site selection

began, that it would buy U.S. Sugar's land. That deal raised the possibility of a swap that would enable the county to get a U.S. Sugar site far from the wildlife refuge, for free.

It would be tempting to start over. Florida Crystals, having seen its competition, is coming in at a lower price. But throwing out the bids to satisfy a single bidder, particularly one as connected as Florida Crystals, could taint what seemingly has been an impartial process.

The leading site is 1,733 acres owned by three farming corporations at state roads 80 and 98. The price, \$68 million, should be negotiable; land values have declined since last year. The site's detractors say it would slight the Glades communities by putting a garbage dump on the main east-west highway. But the county's existing dump is on Florida's Turnpike, and has the upscale Ironhorse development next door. Wellington's concern that housing would be drawn to the dump site also is misguided, since housing has no place in the Everglades Agricultural Area. If anything would taint this process, it would be picking a site to best accommodate housing growth.

With last week's resignation of Mary McCarty, this is hardly the time for county commissioners to play favorites. If a better deal can be cut with the water management district, fine. The county should go after it. But the commission still should begin negotiations today to deliver that top-ranked site.

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## Florida Legislature to hear reports on state economy

01/13/2009

Miami Herald

Klas, Mary Ellen

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Florida lawmakers continued to meet Tuesday in the special budget-cutting session, but they will take no budget action.

Instead, their focus will be on hearing reports on how to stimulate the state economy, getting updates on the state deal to buy U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration and hearing the attorney general weigh in on an Indian gambling compact.

The day of meetings comes at the conclusion of the two-week budget session to give them time to digest the \$65 billion budget package. Legislative negotiators have signed off on \$2.4 billion in cuts to offset declines in revenues. They have \$1.2 billion in program cuts to sort through and the \$1.6 billion stripped from special savings and trust fund accounts.

State law requires legislators to wait 72 hours from the time they receive the final budget package, which was Sunday evening, until the time they vote. After their review, however, they can't change the budget bill.

A vote of the full House and Senate is expected on Wednesday, at which time the session is expected to adjourn two days early.

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