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### State Officials to Tour Hendry/Glades

01/30/2009

Southwest Florida Online  
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#### State Officials Will Spend Several Days Touring

CLEWISTON, FL. -- Officials with the Florida Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development will fly into Hendry County's Airglades airport Tuesday as the first stop on a multi-day trip to the area. The first scheduled activity will be to tour the Airglades Industrial Park and privately owned Hilliard properties in the Clewiston area.

Created in 1996 by the Legislature, the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED), within the Executive Office of the Governor, assists the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Legislature to formulate policies and strategies designed to provide economic opportunities for all Floridians.

OTTED provides executive direction and staff support to develop policies and advocate for economic diversification and improvements in Florida's business climate and infrastructure. Economic development programs are implemented through public/private partnerships for which OTTED provides direct oversight.

Following the airport inspection, the group will tour with the South Florida Water Management District including a flyover of the communities of Clewiston and Moore Haven, areas targeted for use for Everglades Restoration, and over proposed Inland Port sites. Hendry Commissioner Kevin McCarthy is expected to join with OTTED members Dr. Dale Brill and Sherry Martin.

Tuesday afternoon will be spent visiting local businesses followed by an open meeting at 6 p.m. with Clewiston and the Hendry County community at John Boy Auditorium. Dr. Brill will lead a discussion followed by questions and concerns from the audience.

On Wednesday, meetings will be held with local representative and a tour of the Pahokee Marina, the Belle Glade hospital and land owned by the state next to the Belle Glade Industrial Park. An open public meeting will be at 2 p.m. in Moore Haven. In the evening Dr. Brill will address the Glades County Economic Development Council at it's annual dinner and meeting.

Thursday, the group will meet at the Clewiston Inn for breakfast and public meetings with "non-large scale" agriculture interests, including independent sugar cane and citrus growers.

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## **Letter Everglades restoration project will benefit valuable ecosystems**

01/31/2009

Jupiter Courier

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In December the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District approved going forward with the purchase of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar farmland south of Lake Okeechobee. The purpose is to revive the River of Grass that historically connected the flow of water from the lake to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

This was a bold step, taking advantage of a one-time opportunity to buy back some of the 700,000 acres of the Everglades Agricultural Area created in the 1930s after the Herbert Hoover Dike was built around Lake Okeechobee.

Florida Oceanographic has advocated this position since 2000 when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was signed.

The U.S. Sugar farmland purchase is scheduled to close in September. The land will be leased back to farming for the next seven years, allowing a transition for Glades communities and time for project plans and implementation to occur.

We have been working on this issue for awhile and, most recently, attended the first restoration project planning workshop held in Clewiston Jan. 22 to begin the design of the River of Grass connection.

The outlet of water flowing south from Lake Okeechobee will eliminate the damaging discharges to the St. Lucie and

Caloosahatchee River estuaries. The restoration of flowing water south also will help the Everglades and prevent the wasting of more than 620 billion gallons of fresh water each year that now goes to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico water that we need for drinking and irrigation.

This is a complex effort, but our hope is that we can work out the details and truly restore the health of the Everglades while saving the coastal estuaries.

Mark D. Perry

executive director

Florida Oceanographic Society

Stuart

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## **Lobbyist ties, state appraisers' price concerns cloud U.S. Sugar deal**

02/01/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

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Appraisers at Florida's top environmental agency raised sharp questions late last year about the logic behind the \$1.34 billion price attached to Gov. Charlie Crist's mammoth land deal with U. S. Sugar Corp. But it's unclear whether the appraisers at the Department of Environmental Protection ever got satisfactory answers, according to a Palm Beach Post review of more than 2,000 internal e-mails at the agency. In some cases, the questions paralleled objections of critics who say the public is paying an inflated price for the 180,000-acre deal, a keystone of Crist's vision for Everglades restoration. DEP's deputy secretary of land and recreation is also brother to both U.S. Sugar lobbyist Brian Ballard and former Palm Beach County Commissioner Mary McCarty. The department says he had no involvement in the state's negotiations with U.S. Sugar, even though staff assigned to review the appraisals work under him. The well-connected Tallahassee lobbyist was a top adviser to Charlie Crist during the 2006 gubernatorial campaign. He was lobbying Crist on behalf of U.S. Sugar when the governor first proposed a state buyout in late 2007. Dubbed the 'maestro' by Crist, he stepped down as the governor's chief of staff in late December 2007 and returned in April 2008 to the law firm of Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart, this time as chairman. Although Gunster is representing U.S. Sugar in the landmark deal, LeMieux maintains he has had no involvement, either as Crist's chief of staff or as the firm's chairman. 'We are not ready to commit yet,' DEP appraiser Thomas Porter wrote in an e-mail Dec. 1, just two weeks before the board of the South Florida Water Management District approved the state's priciest conservation land purchase by a 4-3 vote.

The e-mails show that in the days before that vote, attorneys for the state quietly deleted a clause in the contract requiring that DEP's staff endorse the appraisals commissioned by the water

district. The change occurred three weeks after the DEP's staff had begun parsing the appraisals.

The DEP instead issued a narrowly worded letter saying the appraisals met basic 'statutory requirements.' The letter said nothing about whether the DEP appraisers agreed with the price.

These maneuverings occurred among staff who work under Deputy Secretary Bob Ballard. Ballard's brother Brian is a well-connected U.S. Sugar lobbyist who helped broker the deal with Crist starting in late 2007.

Also pushing the deal was the DEP's leader, Secretary Mike Sole, who spent weeks rebutting criticism of the deal. Critics say Sole's part in the deal, the Ballards' relationship and the 11th-hour change to the contract raise questions about whether taxpayers' interests were as well-represented as those of U.S. Sugar, Crist and the governor's environmental allies. 'This whole buyout process stinks to high heaven,' said Dexter Lehtinen, an attorney for the Miccosukee Indian Tribe, who has argued in court that the deal represents a waste of public money. 'This thing is so bad that it's difficult to see any explanation that's not illicit.' Sole said his agency's review of the district's appraisals was limited to ensuring they met the 'statutory requirements' for buying property with state money. He said Bob Ballard played no role because of his brother's relationship with U.S. Sugar. 'Because Brian Ballard is a registered lobbyist for U.S. Sugar, I needed to keep Bob Ballard out of this process,' Sole said. Brian Ballard, whose Tallahassee lobbying firm Smith & Ballard reported collecting a total of \$195,000 from U.S. Sugar in 2007 and 2008, said he has spoken to his brother only 'half a dozen' times during the past decade. 'I have never spoken to my brother about any part of his job, ever,' Ballard said. 'I never talked to him about this deal or any other deal at the DEP.' Such a massive expenditure of public money was sure to draw scrutiny.

Early drafts of the district's contract called for DEP's appraisers in the Division of State Lands to certify that the outside appraisals not only met statutory requirements but were also 'acceptable' in 'amount' and 'form.' Even though Crist put the deal together, the \$1.34 billion tab would fall to the taxpayers in the district's 16-county region. Before committing, leaders at the water district asked for buy-in from the state.

On Nov. 14, water district attorney Abner Cooper e-mailed DEP attorney Sandra Stockwell to say that district Executive Director Carol Wehle 'has requested that ... DEP review the district's appraisals.' DEP Chief Appraiser Mike Herran wrote back Nov. 18 that Porter would be reviewing them.

That same day, a bombshell dropped. The district released a 'fairness opinion' it had commissioned from the New York financial firm Duff & Phelps, whose managing director wrote that he had a 'comfort level' with a price of \$930 million for the land.

Damage control ensued. Even though the district paid \$1.5 million for the opinion, district Deputy Executive Director Deena Reppen e-mailed talking points to Sole discounting its relevance. She wrote, in italics: 'There are differing views about the merit of fairness opinions within the business and academic communities.' Porter, meanwhile, began a detailed review of the appraisals, e-mailing questions to the chief appraisers at DEP and the district

on Nov. 20. Porter received answers in an e-mail from the district's chief appraiser less than two hours later. The district also suggested that the DEP's response was needed by Dec. 2 on whether to accept the appraisals.

The DEP never met that deadline, however.

Instead, the district asked U.S. Sugar's law firm in the deal, Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart, to delete the contract's wording that required the DEP to sign off on the appraisals. The law firm's chairman is George LeMieux, who stepped down as Crist's chief of staff in late December 2007. Through a spokeswoman, LeMieux on Friday maintained he has had no involvement in the historic land deal, either as Crist's chief of staff or at Gunster.

Despite the request, a new draft of the contract circulated that still mentioned DEP in the appraisal review clause.

Dec. 10 brought a flurry of activity: First, Stockwell e-mailed a reminder to have the attorneys at Gunster remove the mention of DEP from the appraisal clause.

Around 5 p.m. the same day, water district Chief Appraiser Ray Palmer e-mailed DEP's Porter and Herran 'addenda' to the appraisals that said the deal was worth only \$1 billion to \$1.1 billion, as much as \$300 million less than the agreed-upon price. The discount was based on a below-market rate that the district would charge U.S. Sugar to lease back the land after the sale.

Also that day, DEP Division of State Lands Director Deborah Poppell finally gave water managers a written response on the appraisals. But her letter said only that the appraisals 'would qualify for release of acquisition funds' under state law. It didn't mention any endorsement of the appraisals' dollar amounts. Six days later, the water district's board members, all but one of them appointed by Crist, approved the deal in a nail-biter 4-3 vote. Sole sat in the front row that day and implored the members to vote yes. DEP's appraisers and other officials did not return calls late last week to respond to questions about aspects of their review, including whether the state appraisers had gotten satisfactory answers to their concerns. The DEP responded through spokesman Doug Tobin.

On the state appraisers' review: 'There was no need for our appraisers to comment or commit, because it was beyond the scope of Division of State Lands' duties with respect to Water Management District transactions.' On the removal of DEP from the appraisal clause: DEP 'had it taken out because the Division of State Lands was not a party to the contract and was not meant to be a party to the contract.' Cooper, the water district attorney, was not available for comment.

The DEP also said Bob Ballard did not formally recuse himself from the U.S. sugar negotiations. But 'he had no involvement in them,' Tobin wrote. Because he oversees the Division of State Lands, he arranged for his staff to provide maps, Tobin said. 'On one other occasion, he was present during a meeting among DEP and Division of State Lands staff,' Tobin wrote. 'Bob made no comments.' Staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.

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## County seeks residents' input on landfill

02/01/2009

Sun Sentinel

Jason Parsley

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For now, western communities' residents can breathe a sigh of relief as the Palm Beach County Commission decided to wait another 60 days before choosing an alternative site for the new western county landfill. The recommended site would have put the landfill on Southern Boulevard and U.S. Route 98.

The commission postponed its decision in part because many residents said the county hadn't done enough to inform the public. Additionally, Commissioner Karen Marcus will meet with the South Florida Water Management District to see if a land-swap deal can be reached with the state's future purchase of the U.S. Sugar Corporation's land.

Wellington Mayor Darell Bowen attended the meeting and told the commission he didn't think there was enough public outreach.

"Our council has taken a position that we supported the original site," he said.

That position, however, put the council at odds with environmentalists who are adamant against it because of its proximity to the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge. Many of them are more comfortable with the Southern Boulevard site.

"I'm not sure that we couldn't support one of the other sites, but I think we feel there needs to be more dialogue," Bowen said. "Our residents don't feel like they have had enough information about the two or three remaining sites."

Bowen also referred to the Southern Boulevard site as "the gateway to the Glades."

Councilwoman Lizbeth Benacquisto also voiced her discontent with the recommended site and the process that led up to it.

"Our concerns come with the process," she said. "The folks just didn't know."

She said since the meeting had been announced, they had been able to collect 500 signatures from residents opposing the site. The commission agreed that in the next 60 days, they will reach out to the local municipalities involved, including Fox Trail, the community closest to the recommended site. Fox Trail is in unincorporated Palm Beach County.

"We have not been brought into the discussion," said Fox Trail resident Nancy Gribble. "We are concerned, especially with the traffic. We have a concern about our quality of life."

Wellington resident Melissa Fritsch also is concerned.

"I don't feel the Wellington residents were given adequate opportunities to voice their opinions of the current selection of sites," she said. "I also have concerns about transportation safety on State Road 80. As a mother of three, I travel back and forth on State Road 80 quite a bit, and I don't think that with the increase in truck traffic the route would be safe."

The other two possible locations are the Hundley property, which is four miles west of 20-Mile Bend on County Road 880, and the Okeelanta property, off County Road 827 in South Bay.

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## **Glades finally gets a visit, but will Glades get help?**

02/02/2009

Palm Beach Post

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When the state's top economic development official visits Clewiston and the Glades region for three days of tours and meetings this week, he shouldn't be surprised if he finds some skepticism and outright hostility mixed with the courtesy the region is famous for delivering.

Until now, all signs from the state have been that lip service alone will soothe the communities that stand to lose the most after the state-engineered deal with U.S. Sugar. The weak state response was cited by Patrick Rooney, the South Florida Water Management District board member from Palm Beach County, as the reason why he voted in December against the deal.

After discussing finances, Mr. Rooney said: "The other issue that bothers me more than anything is that if you listen to the folks from Clewiston, these are real people. I don't know how we can say, 'We hope it works out for you.' I need something more definitive from the governor or the Legislature."

So far, Mr. Rooney and Clewiston have gotten nothing definitive from Tallahassee, and the deal to buy U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres for \$1.34 billion is far from done. This month, the district begins planning what it will do with the land, even as it tries to fend off a legal challenge charging that the buyout has no public purpose. A board majority still can stop the deal before September for financial reasons.

Additionally, Mr. Rooney is the closest thing the Glades has to a representative on the district board. Gov. Crist has failed to replace board member Malcolm "Bubba" Wade, a U.S. Sugar executive who resigned in June, a day after the governor announced the buyout. Seven months later, the board still has no Glades-area representative.

The region has been forced to center its hopes on Dale Brill, the governor's director of the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development. But Dr. Brill did nothing before the December buyout vote, and made just a single appearance after it. He promised to return after the Legislature's January special session to begin work on a plan to help the region survive without U.S. Sugar.

On Tuesday, Dr. Brill will fly over the area in a helicopter, tour Clewiston and hold an open meeting with residents. On Wednesday, he tours the Glades and speaks at the Glades County Economic Development Council Annual Dinner. On Thursday, he has breakfast with growers in Clewiston.

Dr. Brill will be immersing himself in the region, as promised, without his top deputy, Mary Helen Blakeslee, who retired Friday. His willingness to spend time to begin to understand the area's apprehension over losing its largest employer is the first good sign that Gov. Crist is interested in anything beyond cementing the U.S. Sugar deal.

But delivering an economic plan to diversify the region's sugar-dependent economy will take hard work long after the tours are over. Dr. Brill will encounter well-founded skepticism. He has three days to start proving that the response should be anything different.

