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Everglades Foundation Urges Lawmakers to Create Economic Plan for Glades Area

02/19/2009
Business Wire

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Residents of 16-County Area Need an Economic Plan

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Environmental leaders today urged Florida lawmakers to bring a greater sense of urgency to protecting the water supply for millions of residents and ensuring the economic health of a 16-county area. The Everglades Foundation believes it is imperative to acquire more than 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land in the Everglades Agricultural Area, but efforts must also include developing a strong financial plan for the communities of the region.

Just yesterday, representatives of the Everglades Foundation testified before the House and Senate General Government Policy Committee regarding the U.S. Sugar land acquisition. Members of the business communities surrounding Lake Okeechobee were also present to testify and share their concerns regarding the lack of urgency by lawmakers to establish an economic proposal for the residents of the 16-county area directly affected by the land

purchase.

"This land purchase is the single most important investment in Florida's history, but the residents of the Lake Okeechobee counties cannot be forgotten in this transaction," said Nathaniel Reed, vice chairman, Everglades Foundation. "Lake Okeechobee is one of the most polluted lakes in America and a major water supply to the Everglades. This public acquisition of extensive acreage in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee is a vital step towards restoring the Everglades and will create thousands of jobs in water infrastructure projects."

"With additional project planning and implementation, we will ultimately secure Florida's environment and economy from the impacts of drought and flood," said Reed.

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has identified its core mission, which is water management and flood control. It is the lawmakers' responsibility to work cooperatively with the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED) to create an economic plan to address the impact of the U.S. Sugar land purchase on the 16-county area and its residents.

"Florida needs a serious push for job-creation," said Kirk Fordham, CEO, Everglades Foundation. "This investment has the potential to create more than 30,000 jobs for Floridians – that is a vital economic benefit from a project with unprecedented environmental significance."

As part of Everglades restoration, there needs to be a complementary economic component to ensure the people of these counties have the right set of skills in place to engage in "shovel-ready" jobs. Although it is not SFWMD's responsibility to write this plan, the District is part of a team and working with the impacted counties to identify land needs for economic development. So far, the SFWMD has slated more than 3,000 acres to transfer to local communities for industrial park development.

About the Everglades Foundation Mission

The Everglades Foundation, Inc. is a 501(c) (3) not-for-profit, charitable organization dedicated to protecting and restoring one of the world's unique natural ecosystems that provides economic, recreational and life-sustaining benefits to the millions of people who depend on its future health. Since 1993, the Everglades Foundation has played a leadership role in advancing Everglades restoration through the advancement of scientifically sound and achievable solutions. The Foundation seeks to reverse the damage inflicted on the ecosystem and provides policymakers and the public with an honest and credible resource to help guide decision-making on complex restoration issues. For more information, please visit www.evergladesfoundation.org.

Bennett Questions 'Glades Purchase

02/19/2009

Manatee-Sarasota Herald
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MANATEE — U.S. Sugar Corp. owns 180,000 acres in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee, a tract Gov. Charlie Crist would like to see used for an Everglades restoration project.

But State Sen. Mike Bennett, R- Bradenton, has filed a bill that would require a local referendum to see if voters really want the South Florida Water Management District to buy the land for about \$1.5 billion.

Bennett is backing a referendum because he thinks the deal is not a good one for Florida. He says the state is paying too much for the tract, could do the job with less land and doesn't really have a solid business plan in place.

"Financially, this thing is way overpriced," Bennett said Wednesday. "I'd say by \$300 to \$400 million, it's overpriced."

"They don't have a business plan to put this to work," Bennett added. "We think they need about 40,000, not 180,000, acres. The \$1.5 billion would have a better use creating jobs for Floridians. I also don't think it's the time to take away land that generates \$59 million in property taxes. In general, it's a dumb idea."

A response from Crist's office was not available Wednesday.

Jimmy Pittman, a city commissioner since 1997 in Clewiston, a town located near Lake Okeechobee and a supplier of manpower to fill about 1,700 U.S. Sugar jobs, said he tended to agree with some aspects of Bennett's analysis.

"When the governor made the announcement in June, the initial reaction of the city was fear over losing all the jobs," Pittman said. "But once the smoke cleared and the shock was over, most people turned to how will this be paid for?"

The plan calls for the South Florida Water Management District to collect the money from residents in the 16 counties that make up the district.

"I tend to agree that the 16 counties should not have to foot the bill to try to restore water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades in order to restore the River of Grass," Pittman said.

Pittman suggests taking a step back.

"Especially in these economic times, maybe we should slow down and take a look at it and put it off for a couple of years," Pittman said.

Bennett also said he thought the state was reacting to "take it or leave it" pressure from U.S. Sugar.

"If someone tells you, 'This deal won't be here tomorrow' you should turn around and walk away," Bennett said.

Attempts were unsuccessfully to reach the mayor of Clewiston.

But in an earlier piece in the Herald, Mayor Mali Soto Chamness said that Clewiston has been pushing to insulate the community against whatever happens.

"We're working on an economic development plan that secures our future," Chamness said. "It's a hard-working community."

If the deal does go through, Clewiston would have a six-year transition period. The town is developing an industrial park, the mayor said.

Bennett said he would love to protect the Everglades, but not by raising the taxes of Floridians, as Bennett claims the water management district would have to do.

Richard Dymond, Herald reporter, can be reached at 708-7917.

Lawmaker Fights U.S. Sugar Deal

02/18/2009

Tampa Tribune

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Feb. 18--TALLAHASSEE -- A Tampa Bay area lawmaker has filed legislation that could stall or even stop Florida from sealing its historic deal with U.S. Sugar to purchase the Everglades for restoration.

Gov. Charlie Crist heavily promoted the \$1.35 billion purchase of 180,000 acres in the Everglades, which would open the way to massive ecological restoration of the area.

The deal-in-progress often is described in shorthand as a state purchase. In reality, the South Florida Water Management District is buying the land, using property tax dollars from residents under the district's jurisdiction.

State Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, said he wants to let affected taxpayers decide whether the district can spend their tax dollars on the Everglades purchase. An outspoken critic of the deal's terms, he said the proposal convinced him that all such deals by water management districts ought to go to local referendum, which is what his bill would require.

"Nobody on the water management district is elected," he said. "They're appointed, but they're not elected. I feel that if they have the ability to raise taxes, that's taxation without representation. I thought we kind of got rid of that premise a couple hundred years ago."

Water management districts follow hydrologic boundaries, not county or voting precinct lines, said Carol Ann Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, which

spreads across 16 counties. "There's no way to have an election."

Eric Draper, deputy director of the Florida Audubon Society, said Bennett's proposal is unfeasible and a "deal killer."

If lawmakers seriously want to thwart the land purchase, Draper said, they ought to ban it outright. "This is just a dishonest way to kill the deal -- to pretend that you're giving it to the voters, when in fact the voters, under this bill, will never see this proposal. Sen. Bennett should just have the courage to stand up and say, 'I'm going to try to get the votes to kill it.'"

Bennett is chairman of the Senate Committee on Community Affairs, which heard Wehle's presentation Tuesday on the land deal's terms and benefits. Afterward, he said he believed a referendum would be possible but conceded it would slow things down. That's something Bennett wants anyway, arguing the deal is too expensive and contains too many unknowns.

"We want sustainable Florida, and we want sustainable communities," said Bennett, who owns property in Clewiston, a town in the Everglades region that expects heavy property value and job losses from U.S. Sugar's departure. "But 'sustainable communities' also means you've also got to be able to afford what you're doing -- and that's a tough issue."

Reporter Catherine Dolinski can be reached at (850) 222-8382.

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Okeechobee is one of the most polluted lakes in America and a major water supply to the Everglades. This public acquisition of extensive acreage in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee is a vital step towards restoring the Everglades and will create thousands of jobs in water infrastructure projects.'? With additional project planning and implementation, we will ultimately secure Florida's environment and economy from the impacts of drought and flood,'? said Reed. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has identified its core mission, which is water management and flood control. It is the lawmakers' responsibility to work cooperatively with the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED) to create an economic plan to address the impact of the U.S. Sugar land purchase on the 16-county area and its residents.'?Florida needs a serious push for job-creation,'? said Kirk Fordham, CEO, Everglades Foundation. 'This investment has the potential to create more than 30,000 jobs for Floridians ' that is a vital economic benefit from a project with unprecedented environmental significance.'?As part of Everglades restoration, there needs to be a complementary economic component to ensure the people of these counties have the right set of skills in place to engage in 'shovel-ready' jobs. Although it is not SFWMD's responsibility to write this plan, the District is part of a team and working with the impacted counties to identify land needs for economic development. So far, the SFWMD has slated more than 3,000 acres to transfer to local communities for industrial park development.

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