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Residents split nearly evenly on sugar deal, poll says

03/02/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

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Florida voters are split just about evenly on Gov. Charlie Crist's proposal to spend \$1.34 billion buying 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland for Everglades restoration, according to a poll commissioned by Glades-area leaders opposed to the plan.

Based on what voters already know of what would be the state's most expensive conservation land deal in history, 45 percent are opposed, 44 percent are in support and 11 percent are undecided, according to results released Monday. The 45-44 split fell well within the 4 percent margin of error.

The poll also found that few understand or even know about the deal: 62 percent of state voters had heard little or nothing about it.

The Glades-area citizens who commissioned the Mason-Dixon Polling & Research study oppose Crist's plan, fearing that shutting down U.S. Sugar Corp.'s farmlands ultimately will eliminate 1,700 local jobs. The governor's land deal carries a September closing deadline.

Public opinion will have no direct impact on whether the deal goes through, because the state purchase will not require either voter or legislative approval. Still, the group of Glades-area bankers, attorneys, farmers and local politicians organized under the name Concerned Citizens of the Glades say the poll results should give Crist pause. 'We think it's important the governor understand how the people of the state feel,' said Hendry County Commissioner Kevin McCarthy, one of the 30 members.

A leader of the Everglades Foundation, a nonprofit group that has championed the deal, disputed the opponents' conclusions. 'I think that public support for the land acquisition is greater than this poll reflects,' foundation CEO Kirk Fordham said.

The poll also says that 60 percent agree with opponents who say the land deal is not a top priority given the state's financial situation, and that 61 percent believe that waiting would produce a better deal. Another 64 percent said the time is not right given the state of the economy.

The telephone poll sampled 625 registered voters statewide and will cost the group between \$12,000 and \$15,000, said Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness, another member.

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Poll Floridians split on sugar land deal

03/02/2009

South Florida Business Journal - Online

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Floridians are divided when it comes to whether the state should go through with the \$1.3 billion purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration, a new poll finds.

But, the poll, conducted by Mason-Dixon for Concerned Citizens of the Glades a grassroots organization opposing the land deal comes with a caveat.

While it found that Floridians are split based on what they know about the deal, when given additional arguments from both sides, 60 percent agree with opponents that buying the land should not be a priority, given the states financial condition. Sixty-one percent feel waiting would result in a better deal. This explains why proponents are trying to rush this deal, why they are holding secret meetings and why they are trying to push for taxpayers to pick up the billion-dollar tab, said Chris Shupe, president of Concerned Citizens of the Glades, in a news release. They know that the more taxpayers learn about this \$1.3 billion bailout, the more they oppose it. The coalition has argued that the deal would cause 1,700 local residents and 10,000 Floridians to lose their jobs, destroy the rural communities and jeopardize the agriculture economy. Weve known all along this was bad economic policy, bad fiscal policy, bad environmental policy and bad for the workforce of Florida, Shupe said. But, now we know that the people of Florida agree that this is a bad deal. Gov. Charlie Crist announced the states plan to purchase the land in June. In November , the South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar concluded negotiations and settled on a purchase price of \$1.34 billion.

The deal includes a leaseback of the land for \$50 an acre for a period covering seven crop cycles. The sugar mill, refinery and citrus processing facilities; railroads; office buildings; equipment and the Gilchrist County citrus nursery are to remain the property of U.S. Sugar.

In December , after months of negotiations, the water management districts board approved the deal.

The purchase would be funded by certificates of participation, or bonds that do not require voter approval.

The water management district has asked a Palm Beach County Circuit Court judge to approve the bond validation process, which Florida Crystals, a U.S. Sugar competitor, is challenging in court.

And, last month, state Sen. Michael Bennett, R-Bradenton introduced a bill that could require voter approval of the water management districts purchase. Bennetts bill (SB 1436) would require a referendum before any water district could issue bonds to fund projects.

Public support split over U.S. Sugar Everglades deal

03/04/2009

Sun Sentinel - West Palm Beach Bureau
Reid, Andy

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Polls: Public support split over U.S. Sugar Everglades deal

By Andy Reid | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
March 4, 2009

Opponents and supporters of the state's \$1.34 billion Everglades restoration land deal now have dueling polls showing conflicting levels of public support for the blockbuster purchase.

On Monday, Glades community leaders opposed to the deal released a poll showing voters split — 45 percent of 625 registered voters polled opposed moving forward with the land deal, 44 percent supported the plan and 11 percent were undecided.

On Tuesday, the Florida Chamber of Commerce released the results of its own poll that showed 66 percent of 600 likely voters polled supported the South Florida Water Management District's proposed purchase from U.S. Sugar Corp.

The deal calls for buying 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar and using the farmland to build a series of reservoirs and water treatment areas to recreate the "missing link" from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

State Senators Eye Cuts, Safety Regulation

03/04/2009

Daily Commercial, The
Benjamin Roode

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TALLAHASSEE -- State Sen. Carey Baker, R-Eustis, has repeated his refrain to constituents in the months running up to the beginning of the Florida Legislature's legislative session this week.

There's no money; don't even ask.

But Baker and State Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, the area's two state senators, are moving forward with their own projects to either cut spending or focus on state safety regulation.

Sen. Carey Baker

Baker's keystone bill is called the Farm to Fork Food Safety Act, a move that would extend state food handling and safety requirements for all of the state's produce beyond tomatoes, which currently see stricter regulation than other produce.

The law would require stricter attire, cleanliness and storage standards when harvesting produce and streamline communication among federal and state regulators and farmers. Farm inspection reports would be available online, as restaurant inspections already are, and it would be easier to trace food back to its place of origin, Baker said.

"This is only good stuff... that ultimately would help reduce the chances of food-borne illness," he said.

Baker's proposal comes months after he announced his run for state agriculture commissioner in 2010. The agriculture commissioner oversees food safety, among other regulatory issues, in the state. Baker's proposed law would affect only produce grown in the state.

Also on the senator's plate is a ban on text messaging while driving. Baker pushed a similar law last year that failed to reach the legislature.

He is not pursuing a ban on phone conversations nor teen cell phone use in cars as he did last session.

"At least when you're talking on the phone you can keep your eyes on the road," he said. "When texting, you take one hand off the wheel and your eyes off the road, which is insane."

Sen. Paula Dockery

State Sen. Dockery, who represents the bulk of South Lake and Sumter counties, did not cite a specific bill as a goal; she said her time in the legislature this session will focus on cutting out special interest spending requests and making sure tax money is spent on things that need it: education, health care and public safety.

While Dockery supports a commuter rail system in Central Florida, she opposes parts of the deal that include millions of dollars in proposed payments to CSX Corp. to upgrade freight rail lines, road overpasses and other upgrades that have little or nothing to do with buying or leasing the rail lines along the Interstate 4 corridor.

"I think (the Florida Department of Transportation) cut a very bad and unfair deal for taxpayers of the state," she said of the proposal, which is up for another fight in the legislature this session.

Scrutinizing deals like the one buying former U.S. Sugar Corp. land in the Everglades for preservation purposes is also a must. As the deal stands now, the South Florida Water Management District is paying too much at about \$7,400 per acre for 180,000 acres of land, she said. Those types of deals, which can pass repayment burdens to people outside the area, must be avoided, especially when the economy is faltering.

Crist Spend to jolt economy

03/04/2009

Miami Herald - Online

STEVE BOUSQUET

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TALLAHASSEE -- In a short and perfunctory State of the State speech, Gov. Charlie Crist urged the Legislature on Tuesday to rally behind his plan to spend billions in federal stimulus money as "a bridge to better economic times" in Florida.

Crist called his address "a dose of reality," muting his usual cheerfulness to state the obvious: An epidemic of foreclosures and business failures and the highest unemployment rate in 17 years has ravaged state revenues. Crist used the deepening economic crisis to justify injecting \$12.2 billion of federal money into the budget over three years.

"Some argue the politics of the federal stimulus plan," Crist said. "My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs -- the needs of our students and teachers, the sick and the infirm, or those out of work."

In his third year in office, Crist is in the awkward spot of facing resistance within his own party in seeking to use stimulus money to jump-start the economy and get people back to work. Underscoring that point toward the end of his speech, Crist said: "We have to be willing to put solutions above who gets the credit."

Reviews were mixed. Some Republicans remain wary of the need to spend all the federal money and risk dramatically increasing the state's future budgetary obligations without knowing when the economy will improve.

"Taking all of it may leave us in a worse position two or three years from now," said Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park. "The most important thing we have to do right now is do no harm."

Crist's 19-minute speech, delivered in a subdued tone with the aid of a TelePrompTer at 6 p.m. to attract live local TV news coverage, brought polite applause from its target audience: the 160 legislators in the House chamber who will spend the next nine weeks scrutinizing his spending plans.

Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, said Crist spoke "in broad strokes" in making a political case -- not a financial case -- for spending stimulus money. "I don't think he quite addressed that," Galvano said, acknowledging "skepticism" about Crist's plan.

What worries some lawmakers is that Crist's \$66.5 billion budget proposal for next year is grounded in revenue information from last fall that will soon be eclipsed by another downturn in revenues when state economists produce the next forecast March 13.

"This budget was rolled out on the high-water mark, knowing that the tide was going down quickly," said Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach. "It is not tethered to reality."

Asked if Crist's speech was realistic, Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Winter Haven, said: "We'll know next week," referring to the revenue forecast. But the Senate budget chief said Crist did offer "hope, direction and leadership that speaks to many Floridians."

The governor also pressed lawmakers to approve a gambling agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida and a tuition increase he described as a "reform." He cited plans to purchase 180,000 acres of Everglades land from U.S. Sugar Corp. and to diversify Florida's energy supply "that balances solar, wind and nuclear" -- leaving out offshore oil drilling that he endorsed during last summer's presidential campaign.

Crist's third State of the State address was the shortest in modern times. (His two previous ones were 29 and 30 minutes.) Former Gov. Jeb Bush's final speech in 2006 ran 35 minutes, and former Gov. Lawton Chiles' finale lasted 30 minutes. is pleased to provide this opportunity to share information, experiences and observations about what's in the news. Some of the comments may be reprinted elsewhere in the site or in the newspaper. We encourage lively, open debate on the issues of the day, and ask that you refrain from profanity, hate speech, personal comments and remarks that are off point. In order to post comments, you must be a registered user of MiamiHerald.com. Your username will show along with the comments you post. Thank you for taking the time to offer your thoughts.

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**Sanibel-Captiva Conservation
Foundation and Everglades Foundation
present conversation forum**

03/04/2009
Naples Daily News

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When: , 7:30 p.m. W

Where: Big Arts, 900 Dunlop Road, Sanibel, FL

Cost: \$20

Age limit: All ages

Categories: Community, Environment, Meetings, Lectures

Description: South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board Vice-Chair, Shannon Estenoz, will visit Sanibel on Mar. 4, 2009, to participate in the Annual Conservation Lecture at BIG ARTS sponsored by the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) and Everglades Foundation. Participants will focus on Everglades restoration and the advantages of the U.S. Sugar Corp. land acquisition to Southwest Florida.

This years timely presentation, U.S. Sugar, Local Aquatic Preserves and the Everglades: How Getting the Water Right in the Everglades Agricultural Area Helps Our Estuary, will also feature Thomas Van Lent, senior scientist, Everglades Foundation, a leading authority on water resource issues and Rae Ann Wessel, natural resource policy director, SCCF, who has brought the voice of the west coast and concern for its estuaries to lawmakers. Estenoz was instrumental in the vote to support the U.S. Sugar Corp. land purchase.

The program will be held on Mar. 4, 2009 at 7:30 p.m. at BIG ARTS Schein Hall. Tickets are \$20 per person. BIG ARTS is located at 900 Dunlop Road, Sanibel. Tickets are available at BIG ARTS or by phone at (239) 395-0900; for more information on the program, please call SCCF at (239) 472-2329.

Reagan accepts the whip as Fla. Legislature opens session

03/04/2009

Bradenton Herald

SARA KENNEDY

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MANATEE Tuesdays opening session of the Florida Legislature entailed the usual pomp and circumstance, with Bradentons Ron Reagan officially installed as House speaker pro tempore.

Reagan invited his parents, Leonard and Betty Reagan, of Fort Myers, to watch the ceremony in the same House chamber where state representatives unanimously voted to make Larry Cretul speaker as its first action of the annual 60-day session. Cretul succeeded Ray Sansom, who was ousted after questions arose about his dealings with a local community college.

Reagan said afterward: Im excited. Im excited for the upcoming legislative session, Im looking forward to serving the speaker, my fellow members, it will be a challenge. It was a thrill, a real thrill getting sworn in by a Supreme Court justice.

Monday, Reagan reported he had received as a gag gift, a green-and-gold whip gleaming with the colors of his alma mater, the University of South Florida. He joked: I have not had to use it yet, but the sessions still early.

Among Reagans pet bills this year is H.B. 439, which the legislator termed the red-light camera bill. It would require counties and municipalities to enforce traffic control signals using traffic infraction detectors (cameras) and would also require annual reports on their use. The bill would allocate part of the fines recouped to trauma centers and public hospitals.

I like it from a public safety standpoint, said Reagan. We use cameras today in every aspect of our lives. Instead of having a police officer at every intersection, you can use a camera to issue citations. It will cut down on people running red lights, and accidents.

It makes sense, I think this is the year for it, said Reagan. Its got support in both the House and the Senate.

Among the favorite bills cited by Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton is S.B. 1436, which would prohibit water management districts from issuing certificates of participation, financial instruments similar to bonds, unless approved by the electors of the district in a referendum.

Although the bill does not address the issue directly, its provisions might require a local referendum to see if voters really want the South Florida Water Management District to buy 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee, officials said.

Gov. Charlie Crist would like to see the tract used for an Everglades restoration project, but Bennett contends its price tag of about \$1.5 billion is too high.

Thats taxation without representation, I really have a problem with that, Bennett said Monday.

Rep. Darryl Rouson, whose district includes parts of Manatee, hopes to see the passage of H.B. 201, which would add a 25 percent surtax to the cost of drug paraphernalia, such as crack pipes and marijuana pipes. The state already levies a 7 percent sales tax on such items.

This project is something I began years ago to try to stop the hypocrisy over these crack pipes and marijuana pipes these stores are able to sell under the guise of tobacco sales, said the St. Petersburg Democrat.

The average 10-year-old child knows illegal drugs are smoked out of these things.

Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, said that so far he has not sponsored any pet bills, partly because of his role as the chairman of the powerful House Rules and Calendar Council.

Since all bills get calendared through Rules, I need to focus on so many different bills as they go through, he noted, but added, There are a lot of bills Im watching out for, and looking out for.

Issues Ill fix my name to will be either large or bigger issues that come up through the session, or what we need procedurally, he said.

Sara Kennedy, Bradenton Herald reporter, can be reached at (941) 708-7908 or at skennedy@bradenton.com

RESTORATION PROGRESS, ECOSYSTEM STATUS HIGHLIGHTED IN SOUTH FLORIDA ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

03/03/2009

PR Newswire Policy & Public Interest

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla., March 2 -- The Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued the following news release:

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) today released the 2009 South Florida Environmental Report detailing a year of restoration, scientific and engineering successes in the Kissimmee Basin, Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades and South Florida coastal areas. The 2009 report marks the 11th year of unified, streamlined environmental reporting by the two agencies.

"Year after year, the State of Florida and the District uphold a commitment to environmental stewardship and ecosystem restoration throughout this region," said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann. "Our accomplishments this year, documented in the comprehensive report, showcase the extensive work we are continually doing and the positive impacts we are achieving."

The 2009 South Florida Environmental Report spans two volumes comprising more than 50 individual reports. The volumes provide extensive research summaries, data analyses, financial updates and a searchable database of environmental projects. The report covers environmental information for Water Year 2008 (May 1, 2007 through April 30, 2008) and project/budgetary information for Fiscal Year 2008 (October 1, 2007 through September 30,

2008).

"Florida continues to display an unwavering dedication to restoring this one-of-a-kind ecosystem," said DEP Secretary Michael W. Sole. "As this report demonstrates, we continue to see progress system-wide, from the Kissimmee River to Florida Bay."

Highlighted in the 2009 report is the SFWMD Governing Board's vote to enter into a historic real estate transaction with the United States Sugar Corporation for the purpose of Everglades restoration. The proposed purchase, subject to financing, is the largest public land acquisition in Florida's history and the single most important action to protect the Everglades since the designation of Everglades National Park some 60 years ago.

Additional events documented in the 2009 report:

- * Textbook examples of South Florida's weather extremes. Prolonged effects of a multiyear rainfall deficit coupled with a slow-moving tropical storm brought more than 14 inches of rain to parts of the region. Tropical Storm Fay inched its way through Florida for six days in August 2008, impacting multiple counties and raising Lake Okeechobee's low water level by more than two feet.

- * Ongoing efforts to improve Everglades water quality. More than 775,000 acre-feet of runoff water was treated through six Stormwater Treatment Areas this water year. Since 1994, constructed treatment marshes together with the farming community's commitment to "Best Management Practices" have prevented more than 2,800 metric tons of phosphorus from entering the Everglades.

- * Northern Everglades restoration planning. As part of the Northern Everglades and Estuaries Protection Program, a collaboration of agencies and stakeholders completed the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Construction Project Phase II Technical Plan and watershed protection plans for both the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and estuaries. Together, these comprehensive plans provide a road map for improving water quality, expanding water storage and protecting and restoring the heart of the South Florida ecosystem.

Other findings in the 2009 report include:

- * Phosphorus source-control programs continue to meet requirements. In Water Year 2008, the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) basin achieved a 44-percent reduction in total phosphorus load, marking the 13th consecutive year of basin compliance with the EAA Basin Rule.

- * Kissimmee River restoration progress continues. Although the Kissimmee River and its floodplain were influenced by drought, densities of long-legged wading birds and waterfowl in the Phase I Restoration floodplain area rebounded from last year's reductions.

- * Backfilling two additional miles of the C-38 Canal was completed. This work, reconnecting four miles of Kissimmee River channel, is expected to re-establish an additional 512 acres of floodplain wetlands.

- * Wading bird nests declined. Dry conditions in previous years coupled with poor foraging conditions last year and higher-than-

normal rainfall during the dry season, led to a 50-percent reduction in wading bird nests in the Greater Everglades ecosystem.

"Detailed data provided in the 2009 South Florida Environmental Report reflect the strength of the science and technology used to direct environmental restoration projects," said Carol Ann Wehle, SFWMD Executive Director. "The combination of sound science, an expert staff and commitment to purpose is a proven formula for our success."

The 2009 South Florida Environmental Report, including a 48-page executive summary, is available online at www.sfwmd.gov/sfer. For more information about US Fed News contract awards please contact: Sarabjit Jagirdar, US Fed News, Email: - htsyndication@hindustantimes.com.

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Poll Voters split on \$1.3 billion proposed buy of U.S. Sugar

03/03/2009

Miami Herald

Morgan, Curtis

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Floridians are divided -- at best -- on Gov. Charlie Crist's bid to buy U.S. Sugar's farms for \$1.34 billion, according to a new poll commissioned by a group fighting the deal.

Released Monday by Concerned Citizens of The Glades Inc., the poll found that while attitudes were split -- 45 percent opposed, 44 percent supportive -- almost two-thirds of the 625 registered voters contacted statewide said they knew little or nothing about the controversial deal that has received intense media scrutiny for nine months.

When provided pro and con arguments, written by pollsters with input from the Clewiston-based business and civic group, those pronouncing themselves opposed to the deal jumped to 56 percent.

"There is a pretty clear lack of any kind of mandate right now for this with the voters," said J. Bradford Coker, managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc., which conducted the survey two weeks ago.

Thom Rumberger, a Tallahassee attorney who chairs The Everglades Trust, which is spearheading lobbying efforts for environmental groups supporting the deal to acquire 180,000 acres of farms and citrus groves, dismissed the results.

"To me, the poll doesn't mean anything when you see who sponsored the poll and paid the money to do it," Rumberger said.

Last month, The Everglades Trust sent out a flier to voters statewide, touting the deal as a landmark land purchase that is key to resolving water supply and pollution problems that have plagued

the Everglades for decades.

The deal, made by the South Florida Water Management District with U.S. Sugar, is not up for any vote or referendum. But with lawmakers in Tallahassee for the start of the 60-day legislative session on Tuesday, both sides have been taking their cases to the public.

Rival growers, many political and business leaders in the rural Glades and Miccosukee Tribe contend the deal will help U.S. Sugar more than the Everglades, arguing the state won't have any money left to do the promised restoration projects -- perhaps for decades.

Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness, a member of the citizens' groups, said the purchase would threaten Glades' communities, citing a University of Florida study. UF researchers predicted a ripple effect of lost agricultural jobs -- 10,000 overall, 1,700 locally -- if the deal were finalized.

"Buying land does not create jobs," Chamness said. "We believe it is bad economic policy."

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Mason-Dixon Voters split on U.S. Sugar deal

03/03/2009

Orlando Sentinel - Online

Aaron Deslatte

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Critics of the state's king-sized deal to buy out U.S. Sugar Corp to help preserve the Everglades have put out a Mason-Dixon poll suggesting Floridians are narrowly divided over the prospect but haven't been presented with enough information. Here's the summary by Brad Coker, Mason-Dixon polling director:

When given the basic details about the proposed purchase by the state of 180,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar for \$1.3 billion in order to help restore the Everglades, Florida voters are about equally split over the deal. Based on what they currently know, 45% statewide say they are opposed, while 44% support it and 11% are undecided.

However, a majority of state voters (62%) say they have heard little or nothing about the deal, and when given additional arguments from both sides, opposition to the plan increases.

Statewide, 60% agree with opponents that spending this \$1.3 billion is not a top priority now given the state's financial situation, 61% feel that waiting would produce a better deal, and 64% feel the time is not right given the state of the nation's economy. This is not surprising, as only 2% of Florida voters currently feel protecting the environment should be the highest priority of state and local government. Higher priority is now placed on creating jobs, providing healthcare, improving education and resolving the

state's budget deficit. The lobbying/PR firm Navigators Global put out the poll and is working on a volunteer basis on behalf of the city of Clewiston, said consultant Kristen Bridges. The group that paid for it, Concerned Citizens of the Glades, Inc. describes itself as 'Glades-area citizens, business people and farmers who came together to unite in an effort to protect the area's local economy, jobs and future.'

VOTERS SPLIT ON LAND BUY FOR EVERGLADES, POLL SAYS

03/03/2009

Sun Sentinel

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Voters remain split on the virtue of spending \$1.34 billion of taxpayer money for farmland targeted for Everglades restoration, according to a poll commissioned by Glades leaders opposing the deal.

A Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. poll released Monday shows that of 625 registered voters across the state who were asked, 45 percent opposed moving forward with the land deal, 44 percent supported the plan and 11 percent were undecided.

"There's a pretty clear lack of any kind of mandate for this," said Bradford Coker, managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research.

Gov. Charlie Crist in June announced plans for the largest public land buy in state history to help reconnect Lake Okeechobee water flows to the Everglades. The deal calls for buying 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. and using the land to build a series of reservoirs and water treatment areas to recreate the "missing link" in the River of Grass.

Opponents question the cost of the deal at a time when the state faces budget deficits amid a struggling economy. Glades community leaders warn that sacrificing farmland for restoration would cost agricultural jobs and have devastating economic consequences.

The Concerned Citizens of the Glades, Inc. - a group of business leaders, farmers and elected officials - commissioned the poll, which cost about \$15,000, according to the group. It comes out just as the state Legislature convenes to consider deep budget cuts.

"The governor should be focused on creating jobs, not destroying them, and buying land doesn't create jobs," Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness said.

Everglades restoration creates jobs, and the long-term benefits of protecting the environment are worth the investment, said Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation.

Pollsters' "push questions" steered the results that sugar-deal opponents were looking for, Fordham said.

"Restoring the Everglades will create thousands of jobs and save even more," he said.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

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Letter Purchasing U.S. Sugar better option than aquifer storage

03/03/2009

Jupiter Courier

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The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan of 2000 has 68 construction features at an estimated cost of \$7.8 billion. It is now estimated at more than \$15 billion. In the plan the largest storage component for Lake Okeechobee water is aquifer storage and recovery pumping water from the lake down 200 wells into the 1,000-foot aquifer and hoping it stays there to be recovered later. This was estimated to cost \$1.16 billion. Its now estimated at \$2.26 billion and \$50 million a year in operation and maintenance (lots of pumping), and all scientist know it wont work. We need to replace this component of the plan with the state purchase of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugars farmland for \$1.34 billion, which would give us land in the Everglades Agricultural Area to make that hydrologic connection from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Even with creating natural water storage treatment and conveyance, it will be saving taxpayers millions and may qualify for federal 50/50 match funds when it comes.

The revival of the River of Grass also will eliminate the unnatural flows from the lake to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee River estuaries, which is killing these coastal ecosystems and wasting Floridas freshwater resources.

It would take the 200 aquifer-storage-and-recovery wells 400 days pumping 24 hours a day, seven days a week to lower the lake by three feet, while the River of Grass project would take only about 80 days.

It is the better project for the Everglades plan, costing a lot less and providing more natural storage options. It also will let nature help store the water, with 84 percent going to evapotranspiration, and recharge the aquifers south of the lake. This is sure better than pumping it into many holes, at great expense, only to lose it forever.

Mark D. Perry

executive director

Florida Oceanographic Society

Stuart

Chamber poll Crist's voter approval at 70%

03/03/2009

South Florida Business Journal - Online

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A new Florida Chamber of Commerce poll finds Floridians are still happy with the job Gov. Charlie Crist is doing.

He received a 70 percent approval rating, while 21 percent disapproved.

The poll also shows that 66 percent of Floridians support the South Florida Water Management Districts purchase of 182,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for restoration of the Everglades. Though we are continuing to see the overall mood of the electorate souring, Gov. Crist's popularity remains high, said Marian Johnson, the chamber's vice president of political affairs.

The findings conflict with a poll released Monday by Mason-Dixon for Concerned Citizens of the Glades, a grassroots organization opposing the land deal.

That poll found Floridians are divided when it comes to whether the state should go through with the \$1.3 billion purchase.

Among other poll findings:

50 percent felt Florida was heading in the wrong direction. 55 percent opposed a 2 percent increase in the state sales tax. 55 percent said the legislature should cut government spending, even if it means cutting programs and services. 25 percent said the legislature should not cut any programs, but should raise taxes to pay for government expense. The survey of 600 likely Florida voters was conducted Feb. 23-24 by Fabrizio, McLaughlin and Associates. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

Crist No tax hikes or budget cutbacks

03/03/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

MICHAEL C. BENDER and DARA KAM

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By TALLAHASSEE Republican Gov. Charlie Crist opened the 2009 legislative session Tuesday with a clear admission of Florida's bleak economy and a seemingly difficult task for lawmakers: Avoid tax increases and further cuts to the budget. 'The state of our state may be challenged today,' Crist said. 'But my friends, the determination of our people is stronger than ever.' 'Strive to seek honest-to-goodness cooperation,' Gov. Charlie Crist says in opening this year's legislative session Tuesday in Tallahassee.

After declaring the state 'strong' for two consecutive years, Crist on Tuesday dialed down his trademark optimism to fit the realities confronting Florida, where median home values have dropped 33 percent in the past year, the unemployment rate has doubled in the past 16 months, and the number of people applying for food stamps has jumped 45 percent.

Given those troubling statistics, the 16-minute speech from Crist was perhaps his most important address to the legislature as he begins his third year as governor. Crist's staff was particularly sensitive about finding the balance between his usual hopefulness and acknowledging the continuing slide of the state economy.

Reactions immediately after the address were mixed. 'The governor does a good pony and dance show, but he has not really focused on those issues we know will generate revenue,' said Senate Democratic Leader Al Lawson of Tallahassee. 'And that is closing tax loopholes.' House Majority Leader Adam Hasner, R-Boca Raton, said a meeting next week of state economists, who are expected to present lawmakers with a \$5 billion budget shortfall for 2009-10, could present a 'whole different set of facts and circumstances.' 'There are some things you can't shine,' said former Senate President Jim King, a Jacksonville Republican who is term-limited in 2010. 'We're in trouble, and he pointed it out, and he gave a good course of action to make it work.' Crist made no major announcements in his speech and offered few additional details for his \$66.5 billion spending plan for 2009-10, which is \$1.5 billion more than this year.

The governor urged lawmakers to support his proposal to buy 187,000 acres owned by U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$1.34 billion to restore the natural water flow through the Everglades. Lawmakers do not have to approve the deal, but they could try to derail it.

Crist urged lawmakers to approve a commuter rail line for Central Florida, called on them to 'adequately fund education' and to 'quickly approve' a deal to expand gambling at Seminole Indian casinos and add \$2.5 billion to state coffers over 25 years. 'Whether you are for or against gambling, the compact makes sense and deserves your support,' Crist said. The governor's budget leans heavily on the federal stimulus package to bail out lawmakers from having to choose between hiking taxes or making more cuts. 'This money,' Crist said of the stimulus, 'will help us avoid tax increases and prevent deep cuts that would further burden Florida's families and businesses.' Roundly criticized by state and national conservatives for supporting President Obama's stimulus package, Crist urged lawmakers to shed party labels and instead 'strive to seek honest-to-goodness cooperation.' 'For those of you who wish to keep score,' Crist said, 'I ask you to mark your wins and losses not for our parties but for the people we serve.' Crist's hopefulness was not shared by lawmakers, wary after

cutting more than \$7 billion from the state budget in less than two years.

Those reductions, which forced lawmakers to hold two special sessions within 15 months, resulted in a tepid opening Tuesday to the annual spring legislative session.

House Republicans scratched a traditional Monday night party, which has cost about \$5,000. The caucus also decided to forgo flowers on Tuesday for the lapels of lawmakers and former lawmakers, which saved the Republican Party of Florida about \$750.

There were similar cutbacks Tuesday night at the Governor's Mansion.

Crist hosted his annual State of the State dinner, but instead of the formal \$40-per-head banquet he has held in years past, leaders from the House and Senate, agency heads and the governor's office staff were treated to a \$12-per-person barbecue in the back yard. 'Our people are struggling, as a state and as a nation,' Crist said. 'And like never before, we have an obligation to serve them well.' In the Senate, President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, gave his fellow 39 members a sextant, a navigational tool invented in the 18th century that uses the stars to chart a journey. The state GOP paid \$1,300 for the gifts, which Atwater said were a metaphor to help lawmakers craft a budget in a worsening economy. 'None of us bargained for this,' Atwater said. 'But neither did one in 13 of our neighbors who have now lost their homes. Nor did one in 12 of our neighbors who are now unemployed. ... They didn't bargain for this either. But senators, we are obligated to confront it.' The budget is just one concern for lawmakers in the House, where the Republican majority is still dealing with controversy surrounding former Speaker Ray Sansom, R-Destin, who was forced to give up his position after questions were raised about his close relationship with Northwest Florida State College.

Rep. Larry Cretul, R-Ocala, was officially sworn in Tuesday as Sansom's replacement. 'The state of the state is: We need to be concerned,' Cretul said. 'I love optimism, but I have also been around long enough that sometimes even optimism is not necessarily the solution to the problem.' We'd like your thoughts on this story. I appreciate your willingness to share them. At PalmBeachPost.com, we want to avoid comments that are obscene, hateful, racist or otherwise inappropriate. If you post offensive comments, we will delete them as soon as we can. If you see such comments, please . John Bartosek, Editor, The Palm Beach Post.

*HTML not allowed in comments. Your e-mail address is required.

Poll Floridians oppose sugar land deal

03/02/2009

Jacksonville Business Journal

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Floridians are divided when it comes to whether the state should go through with the \$1.3 billion purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration, a new poll finds.

But the poll, conducted by Mason-Dixon for Concerned Citizens of the Glades a grassroots organization opposing the land deal comes with a caveat.

While it found that Floridians are split based on what they know about the deal, when given additional arguments from both sides, 60 percent agree with opponents that buying the land should not be a priority, given the states financial condition. Sixty-one percent feel waiting would result in a better deal.

This explains why proponents are trying to rush this deal, why they are holding secret meetings and why they are trying to push for taxpayers to pick up the billion-dollar tab, said Chris Shupe, president of Concerned Citizens of the Glades, in a news release. They know that the more taxpayers learn about this \$1.3 billion bailout, the more they oppose it.

The coalition has argued that the deal would cause 1,700 local residents and 10,000 Floridians to lose their jobs, destroy the rural communities and jeopardize the agriculture economy.

Weve known all along this was bad economic policy, bad fiscal policy, bad environmental policy and bad for the workforce of Florida, Shupe said. But, now we know that the people of Florida agree that this is a bad deal.

Gov. Charlie Crist announced the states plan to purchase the land in June. In November , the South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar concluded negotiations and settled on a purchase price of \$1.34 billion.

The deal includes a leaseback of the land for \$50 an acre for a period covering seven crop cycles. The sugar mill, refinery and citrus processing facilities; railroads; office buildings; equipment and the Gilchrist County citrus nursery are to remain the property of U.S. Sugar.

In December , after months of negotiations, the water management districts board approved the deal.

The purchase would be funded by certificates of participation, or bonds that do not require voter approval.

The water management district has asked a Palm Beach County Circuit Court judge to approve the bond validation process, which Florida Crystals, a U.S. Sugar competitor, is challenging in court.

And, last month, state Sen. Michael Bennett, R-Bradenton introduced a bill that could require voter approval of the water management districts purchase.

Bennetts bill (SB 1436) would require a referendum before any water district could issue bonds to fund projects.

Governor Crist's State of the State Address

03/04/2009
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Governor Crist's State of the State Address
Urges measures to strengthen economy and workforce, education,
Everglades restoration.
Wednesday March 4th, 2009

TALLAHASSEE – Governor Charlie Crist last night addressed a joint session of the Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate to outline his vision for safeguarding Florida's future by continuing investments in education, public safety and programs that serve Florida's most vulnerable citizens. As part of his ongoing commitment to strengthening Florida's economy, the Governor emphasized policy and budget recommendations for the upcoming 2009 Legislative Session that address the priorities of the people of Florida – workforce initiatives, job creation and business development. Continuing the tradition he began in 2008, Governor Crist gave the State of the State Address at 6:00 p.m., rather than during the morning as past Florida Governors have done.

“For the nearly 20 million people who choose to call Florida home, to not just raise their children and build their businesses, but to truly live out their dreams: The future is now,” Governor Crist said. “Our state and national economies are being tested and challenged in ways not seen in decades. Our people are struggling, and like never before, we have an obligation to serve them well.”

Governor Crist called on the Legislature to adopt his proposed \$66.5-billion budget that includes \$10.2 billion for infrastructure improvements in transportation and economic development, \$21.5 billion for education, \$2.3 billion to protect Florida's natural resources, \$4.8 billion for public safety and \$25.2 billion for health and human services.

Florida National Guardsmen

During the address, Governor Crist honored Florida National Guardsmen Chief Warrant Officer Jolly Harper and Major Julio Acosta.

· Currently assigned to the Joint Forces Headquarters in St. Augustine, Chief Warrant Officer Jolly Harper is a military aviator

who has served in the Balkans, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. In 2008, Chief Warrant Officer Harper was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the nation's highest award for aerial valor, for his actions on June 8, 2004, in Afghanistan. Harper was flying an Apache helicopter called to assist a Marine convoy trapped in a three-sided ambush. After intense fighting and depleted fuel and ammunition, he refueled, rearmed his crew, and returned to continue the fight until the Marine convoy could extract themselves from the ambush. He has also been awarded the Meritorious Service Medal and the Army Commendation Medal. His wife Tami Jean, known as "TJ," joined him in the gallery.

· A highly decorated officer, Major Julio Acosta is currently an Anti-Armor Company Commander and Operations Officer in the 1st Battalion, 124th Infantry. Major Acosta received the Army Commendation Medal with Valor Device for his leadership as a tactical trainer with the Afghanistan Army on December 4, 2005, when a vehicle in his convoy was struck by an improvised explosive device (IED). After helping rescue three injured soldiers from a burning vehicle and administering medical aid, he led troops in preventing the Taliban from overrunning a nearby observation point under enemy fire. He has also been awarded the Bronze Star Medal, the Combat Infantry Badge, Expert Infantry Badge, Parachutist Badge, Air Assault Badge, Pathfinder Badge, and Ranger Tab. His wife Odalys joined him in the gallery.

Wise Use of the Federal Stimulus Dollars

Governor Crist urged legislators to put the needs of the people of Florida before politics by supporting the full use of the \$12.2 billion in federal stimulus dollars coming to Florida over three budget years. Governor Crist's proposed 2009-10 budget includes \$4.7 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Over the years, Florida is expected to receive \$5.3 billion for health and human services programs such as Medicaid, food stamps and cash assistance; \$1.4 billion for highway and transportation projects; \$148 million for programs to promote energy efficiency; and \$162 million for workforce employment and training. According to information released by the White House, the economic stimulus funding will create or retain 206,000 jobs statewide.

"The federal stimulus package will provide much needed tax relief, as well as immediate assistance in education, transportation, unemployment compensation, renewable energy and other aid," Governor Crist said. "My administration looks forward to working with this Legislature, our cities and counties to begin implementing these dollars quickly and efficiently."

Special Advisor to the Governor for the Implementation of the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

Governor Crist announced that Don Winstead, deputy secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, will serve as Special Advisor to the Governor for the Implementation of the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Winstead will work in coordination with the Federal Stimulus Working Group assembled by the Governor in early February to

oversee and track the distribution of Florida's stimulus dollars and ensure taxpayers can hold government accountable for its use of the funds.

From late 2001 to early 2005, Winstead served as deputy assistant secretary for human services policy at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In this capacity, he was a key advisor on human services policy and was responsible for policy development, research and evaluation related to welfare reform, support for low-income families, and services for families, children and youth.

Recognized nationally as an expert on federal funding issues, Winstead has negotiated groundbreaking federal waivers in welfare reform and child welfare. He is a member of the advisory boards of the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan and the Center for Poverty Research at the University of Kentucky. Winstead began his career as a front-line caseworker and has worked in a variety of direct-service, administrative and managerial positions ranging from social worker to deputy secretary.

As Special Advisor to the Governor for the Implementation of the Federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Winstead will:

- Track all federal stimulus dollars flowing into state and local governments, as well as to private businesses and non-profit organizations.

- Maximize the state's use of available federal stimulus funds, including competitive grants.

- Identify the quickest ways to move the stimulus money into the economy.

- Establish open and effective lines of communication with federal and state agencies, local governments, and the Florida Legislature to assist in efforts to effectively and rapidly use the federal stimulus funds.

- Develop a communications network to keep the public informed about the status and progress of the recovery effort.

- Report to the Florida Legislature and citizens on a regular basis about the status of the use of the stimulus funds.

- Measure progress of the recovery effort by tracking jobs created and retained.
- Ensure that recipients of stimulus funding are aware of applicable federal requirements and that all parties comply with the provisions.

Compact Between the State of Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida

Governor Crist also called on the Florida Legislature to quickly approve the 25-year compact between the State of Florida and the Seminole Tribe of Florida, emphasizing that its approval can provide \$2.5 billion to Florida schools throughout the duration of the agreement. Since the compact was approved by the United States Department of the Interior in December 2007, the Seminole Tribe has paid \$75 million to the State of Florida, and will pay another \$62.5 million during the remainder of the current fiscal year. All of those funds are available to enhance and support Florida's education system in 2009-10, as well as the guaranteed \$150 million. In addition, the approved compact is projected to provide at least \$129.2 million for education in 2010-11, and at least \$100 million in 2011-12. These funds could be significantly larger if the tribe exceeds certain thresholds outlined in the compact.

Workforce Initiatives

To help get Floridians back to work, Governor Crist highlighted his \$2-billion budget recommendation for workforce initiatives. Among his recommendations, Governor Crist is proposing \$800 million for career education and employment services that retain 3,000 jobs, \$621.2 million that will provide affordable childcare to families of 154,835 Florida children and protect more than 12,800 jobs for child-care providers, and \$6.6 million for Ready to Work. The credentialing program ensures students and job seekers master applied math, reading for information and locating information and helps employers hire skilled employees. For more information, visit FloridaReadyToWork.com.

Economic Development

Governor Crist highlighted several economic development efforts of the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development. The Governor's proposed budget includes \$45 million for the Quick Action Closing Fund (QAC) to enable a quick response to extraordinary economic opportunities and effective competition for projects involving significant capital investment and 17,316 high-wage jobs with average annual salaries of \$56,334. Governor Crist is recommending \$10 million to encourage the filming and production of television, film, commercial, and digital media in Florida, which has an anticipated return on investment of \$7.48 for every incentive dollar and can create as many as 15,414 jobs. He also highlighted \$10 million for Economic Gardening, a pilot program to stimulate investment in Florida's economy by providing low-interest loans to expanding businesses.

Transparency in Education Spending

Governor Crist urged the Legislature to ensure taxpayers can track K-12 education funding online and require school districts to spend a minimum of 70 percent of operating dollars directly in the classroom. He emphasized that parents and taxpayers have a right to demand accountability.

Higher Education Reform

The Governor also encouraged legislators to give Florida's 11 state universities the resources they need to compete with universities nationwide. Governor Crist noted that Florida has five of the nation's largest universities; however, only the University of Florida is ranked among the United States' leading 100 universities. Governor Crist has proposed a five percent base undergraduate tuition increase, in addition to measures that will give the 11 state universities flexibility to charge a differential tuition that will generate revenue to enhance undergraduate education and need-based aid. Currently, five state universities have this flexibility, as previously authorized by the Legislature.

Saving America's Everglades

Governor Crist highlighted the importance of the South Florida Water Management District's acquisition of the 300 square miles that is the "missing link" needed to reconnect Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park. One of the largest environmental land acquisitions in the nation's history, the action will protect Florida's coastal estuaries and better revive, restore and preserve the Everglades, one of America's greatest natural treasures. Acquiring the land will increase the ability to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades during dry times and provide greater water storage to protect the natural system during wet years.

Renewable Portfolio Standard

The Governor called on legislators to ratify the Public Service Commission's renewable portfolio standard that will diversify Florida's energy supply to include renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and biomass. The standard will require each investor-owned utility to produce 20 percent of its energy by 2020. Legislation sponsored by Representative Debbie Mayfield in the House of Representatives and Senator Lee Constantine in the Senate will continue Florida's progress toward a diversified energy future, "green" energy business development, and increased energy conservation and efficiency.

Last June, Governor Crist signed House Bill 7135, sponsored by the late Representative Stan Mayfield and known as the 2008 Energy and Economic Development Legislation, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as encouraging investment in alternative and renewable energy technologies. For more

information, please visit www.MyFloridaClimate.com.

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Governor Charlie Crist's 2009 State of the State Address

March 3, 2009

Good evening. Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Lt. Governor, Madam Chief Justice and members of the court, members of the Cabinet, members of the Legislature, honored guests, and my fellow Floridians. Good evening to you all.

I want to recognize my family seated in the gallery, my beautiful wife Carole, my mother and my father. Thank you for your support. I love you all very much.

I begin tonight by honoring Chief Warrant Officer Jolly Harper and Major Julio Acosta for their service to the people of Florida and to our nation. Whether serving in Afghanistan as these men have – or in Iraq or other places around the globe – the Florida National Guard and our Armed Forces are protecting our freedom.

* * * * *

For the nearly 20 million people who choose to call Florida home, to not just raise their children and build their businesses, but to truly live out their dreams; the future is now.

The strength of our state and national economies are being tested in ways not seen in decades: unemployment is at a 16-year high. We are in a national housing crisis and foreclosures continue to rise; businesses are shutting their doors in the communities they have long served; and a weakened Wall Street has left us in a credit crunch that is cutting into hardworking families' nest eggs and college savings. Our people are struggling, as a state and as a nation. And like never before, we have an obligation to serve them well.

The state of our state may be challenged today, but my friends, the determination of our people is stronger than ever.

Because I believe that with every crisis comes opportunity. We gather here tonight with the tools and the resolve – the opportunity – to preserve investments in our students and teachers, the opportunity to preserve investments in the safety and security of our people, in the health and well-being of the most vulnerable among us – and the opportunity to preserve our investments in the very reasons government exists to serve.

Since I took office two years ago, we have cut state spending by \$7 billion, lowered property taxes by an estimated \$25 billion over five years and created innovative no-cost solutions like the Florida Discount Drug Card and Cover Florida. In fact, the CATO institute has recognized our state as the most fiscally responsible in the nation. And while we have taken these prudent steps, tough decisions lie ahead. We are going to have to work to make people our priority and to spend their money wisely while continuing to lessen their tax burden.

Ten days ago I sent to you a budget recommendation that addresses the people's priorities for our future. The \$66 billion plan includes more than \$10 billion for infrastructure improvements in transportation and economic development – including Central Florida's commuter rail; a \$21 billion investment in our students and teachers; more than \$2 billion to protect and preserve Florida's natural resources; nearly \$5 billion to keep our people and our neighborhoods safe – the most critical function of government; and more than \$25 billion to fund critical health care services for our citizens.

I am grateful for Florida's share of the federal stimulus bill. These funds will serve as a bridge to better economic times. This money will help us avoid tax increases and prevent deep cuts that would further burden Florida's families and businesses. The Federal Stimulus bill is not perfect; I've never seen a bill that is. But, this package will provide much needed tax relief, as well as immediate assistance in education, transportation, unemployment compensation, renewable energy and other aid and is expected to save or create as many as 206,000 jobs that the people of Florida desperately need. Of the more than \$12 billion our state will receive over three years our budget proposes using nearly \$5 billion next year.

Our administration looks forward to working with this Legislature, our cities and counties to begin implementing these dollars quickly and efficiently. I'm proud to announce that Don Winstead, a long-time public servant and deputy secretary of the Department of Children and Families, will serve as Special Advisor to the Governor for the Implementation of the American Recovery Act.

We must use every dollar available to us to adequately fund education, and I again call upon this Legislature to quickly approve the Compact between the state of Florida and the Seminole Tribe. Approval will release at least \$2.5 billion over 25 years to help

educate our children. Approval of the Compact will preserve and create thousands of jobs for Floridians and will safeguard us against the expansion of gambling to every corner of our state. Failure to act will take the process out of our hands, and may lead to the loss of all revenues. Whether you are for or against gaming, the Compact makes sense and deserves your support.

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There is no doubt, that for our economy to recover, we must get people back to work. In the past several weeks I have visited with Floridians at seven unemployment offices across our state. I have looked into their eyes and I saw worry. I saw good, honest people who desperately want the opportunity to help themselves. Some argue the politics of the federal stimulus plan. My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs – the needs of our students and teachers, the sick and the infirm, or those out of work. We should not ask what it means to be Republican nor should we ask what it means to be Democrat; but rather what a good human being is supposed to do. In each and every one of us is the hope of the millions who sent us here. We must honor that sacred trust, to put them first.

To help our workforce adapt to a changing economy, I recommend \$2 billion in workforce investments. These initiatives include over \$800 million for career education and employment services that will retain 3,000 jobs. They also include the School Readiness program, which helps preschoolers develop the skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond – and helps parents maintain employment and achieve financial independence. An investment of \$621 million in getting the next generation off to a good academic start will retain more than 12,800 jobs for child-care providers and allow families to remain in the workforce. \$6.6 million for Ready to Work will ensure job-seekers of all ages have the skills needed for most jobs today, giving them an edge with employers –in Florida, and nationwide.

Employers like Shands Jacksonville and Lockheed Martin rely on Ready to Work because it ensures high-quality applicants. They have reduced turnover among new employees, as well as their hiring and training costs; and are giving long-time employees the opportunity to learn more – and earn more.

Perhaps, the ingenuity of Floridians is no better represented than in the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of our state's business community. Small business owners, in particular, are embracing the challenges of the economy, driven by a hope for prosperity. They are inspired by a vision of a better way of life for their families and their employees.

We must reward – not penalize or stifle – innovation and productivity in our business community. As we pursue our efforts in this Legislative Session, let us remember that the circle of

prosperity in the Sunshine State begins with business.

To this end, our Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, working with its public/private partnerships, helps jump-start high-potential business sectors throughout our state. As a result, Florida's sports industry has grown to a \$36-billion-a-year business sector – film and entertainment, nearly \$18-billion-a-year – and international trade, \$130 billion in 2008 alone. More than 550 aerospace companies call Florida home, securing the Sunshine State's place as a leader in space. With more than 600 biotech pharmaceutical and medical companies and a foundation of nearly 40,000 healthcare facilities, Florida's life sciences cluster continues to gain critical mass.

Our goal is to create a business environment where productivity and growth flourish – and to create quality, high-paying jobs. My recommendation for the Quick Action Closing Fund invests \$45 million to attract and retain industries, aimed at providing more than 17,000 high-wage jobs.

We look ahead to strengthen our economic development efforts and embrace the success of companies who already call Florida home. While we seek a return to the enduring principles of smart lending to restore the flow of capital and credit into our business communities, we must lift from our shoulders fear and pessimism and take up the mantle of persistence and determination to make the coming year better than the last. And we must do so with the realization that our actions today affect every future generation.

* * * * *

So, for our precious children, the future is now.

We must build on the foundation of accountability laid by my predecessor that has taken Florida's schools from 31st in the nation in 2007 to 10th in the nation today. More of our students are graduating than ever before, with our African-American and Hispanic students showing some of the greatest gains. I urge you to pass legislation requiring school districts to spend 70 percent of their budgets in the classroom for our students and teachers, and to instill transparency by requiring school districts to provide dollar-by-dollar details online. Floridians deserve to know how their hard-earned dollars are being spent, and parents have a right to demand accountability. And I ask you to consider, as I have proposed, increasing per-student funding – Florida's children deserve it.

We must also renew our commitment to higher education. The strength of Florida's economy is dependent upon a workforce able to compete in an increasingly global economy. Our 28 community

colleges are already recognized as the number one in the U.S. and I am committed to giving our universities the resources they need to be among the best in the nation. I am as committed as ever to keeping our schools affordable, but we must also enable them to achieve excellence.

These reforms cannot wait. The doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs and engineers of tomorrow are sitting in our grade school classrooms, and walking our college campuses right now. For them, the future is now.

* * * * *

And for Florida's beautiful environment, the future is now.

From sugar-sand beaches and coral reefs, to crystal clear springs and rivers among lush forests, all with glorious sunrises and amazing sunsets. We must take action in our lifetime to protect these treasures, or future generations will not experience the Florida we know and love.

Now more than ever, we have before us a historic opportunity to save America's Everglades so that students and teachers can learn from this living classroom – a place known throughout the world as a true wonder, a mosaic of freshwater ponds, prairies and forested uplands.

We have taken the first steps toward what promises to be a historic move to save our Everglades. This move is as significant as the creation of the Everglades National Park itself. By acquiring nearly 300 square miles, we can reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Park; allowing us to clean, move and store water and protect the coastal estuaries. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity before us now.

This administration is committed to a diverse energy supply that balances solar, wind and nuclear. Last year's energy bill was made possible by the strong support of our departed friend Representative Stan Mayfield. Stan's vision for Florida continues. Thank you, Representative Debbie Mayfield for your courage and leadership in seeing Stan's vision. We have a chance to diversify our energy supply and I urge the members in this chamber to pass this important legislation.

* * * * *

We must remember that the strength of our state is not in the

might of our laws or the power of our bully pulpits, but in our ability to protect the hopes and dreams of the very people we serve.

The future is now, my friends, and if we endeavor to strengthen and diversify our economy by capitalizing on the opportunities before us; if we seek to preserve God's majestic creation for generations to come; if we believe today's students can flourish as tomorrow's leaders, and if we hope to preserve the promise of the future for all Floridians – then we must come together as never before.

We must commit to one another and to each and every Floridian that we will work toward more than just the perception of bipartisanship, but strive to seek honest-to-goodness cooperation. There will be disagreements and differences of opinion, and that is the mark of a healthy democracy. But we have to be willing to put solutions above who gets the credit, and results above individual gain. People are counting on us, and for those of you who wish to keep score, I ask you to mark your wins and losses not for our parties, but for the people we serve.

Each of us in this chamber tonight remembers the moment we first decided to run for office, to aspire to be public servants. We are going to have to dig, and I mean really dig deep, for the hope and the optimism and the determination that inspired you to put your name on a ballot and declare to the people of this state, you deserve their vote!" They sent us here through a sacred trust and we'd better fight to earn every bit of it over the next 60 days, because the future is now and the people we serve are counting on us to work – not for the next election – but for them and for Florida's next generation.

May God bless you and may he continue to bless our beautiful Florida.

