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Total Clips: 3

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Land buy boosts restoration	05/26/2009	Miami Herald - Online	
FOR FLA. LOBBYISTS, WHAT RECESSION?	05/26/2009	St. Petersburg Times	CAPUTO, MARC
Community Conversations: We're looking for citizen editorial board members	05/24/2009	News-Press	Plazas, David

Land buy boosts restoration

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Miami Herald - Online

[Return to Top](#)

Everglades restoration has been a priority at the South Florida Water Management District for more than a decade. That priority was underscored this month with a landmark decision by the district's Governing Board to invest \$536 million in the largest land buy in the agency's history -- a 73,000-acre acquisition that will provide unprecedented opportunities for preserving the famed River of Grass.

When the multi-billion state-federal partnership to restore the Everglades was first developed in the 1990s, access to vast areas of agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee to construct restoration projects was not a possibility. But that changed last June when Gov. Charlie Crist announced the willingness of the U.S. Sugar Corporation to sell its land holdings to the district for Everglades restoration. It was a milestone moment for the environment -- followed by months of complex negotiations, hard work and due diligence.

Over many months of deliberation, the board carefully weighed the restoration opportunities of this purchase with the agency's additional responsibilities for flood control, water quality improvements and protection of the regional water supply. With fiscal realities in mind, the board approved an affordable acquisition strategy that would place 112 square miles of strategically located property into public ownership by next year, with an option to purchase another 167 square miles during the next 10 years.

This historic acquisition promises incalculable benefits to the River of Grass and to Florida's coastal estuaries. Most notably, projects are contemplated that will improve water-quality treatment to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades and prevent tons of harmful nutrients from entering the fragile ecosystem.

Beneficial projects

Other projects will significantly increase water storage -- improving the flow of water to the Everglades, reducing harmful freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and virtually eliminating the need for "back-pumping" stormwater runoff into the lake. Without this land, opportunities for some of these projects and their benefits could be

lost.

While allowing for economic conditions to improve, the phased approach to acquiring land also helps to sustain agriculture in the region, an important part of the local and statewide economy. Furthermore, it will provide at least a decade for the Glades communities, which depend heavily on agriculture, to work with the state and other partners to develop new industries and growth opportunities for their region.

Acquiring these strategic lands is the first step in realizing our restoration goals, which will require vision, leadership, cooperation and partnership at all levels. Project planning, now under way with scientists, engineers and a diversity of interests, must remain an inclusive and collaborative process.

Streamlining permitting

Project permitting with regulatory agencies must be streamlined so that unnecessary and costly litigation does not impair our efforts. And our federal partners in restoration must continue to deliver their share of project funding. This vast area of land will serve the Everglades -- and the economy -- when dirt has actually been turned and constructed projects are in the ground and operating.

In our board discussions, I often compared this acquisition to the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 brought more than 800,000 square miles into public ownership and doubled the size of the United States. President Thomas Jefferson believed the controversial purchase was a priority investment, and history proved him right. This acquisition is not nearly on that scale -- but for Everglades restoration, it feels that big. And it promises equally big opportunities in return.

Eric Buermann is chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.

FOR FLA. LOBBYISTS, WHAT RECESSION?

05/26/2009

St. Petersburg Times

CAPUTO, MARC

[Return to Top](#)

In the midst of a \$6 billion state budget deficit and widespread private-sector layoffs, one Florida industry looks recession-proof: lobbying state lawmakers.

The Capitol lobbying corps earned up to \$45 million from January through March to influence the Legislature. That's essentially the same amount that all 2,000 state lobbyists made in the same period in 2008, when Florida wasn't in a financial crisis.

But lobbyists didn't earn all that money despite the dire financial times - they say they earned it because of the terrible economy.

"Sure, it's ironic," lobbyist Ron Book said. "But the bottom line is people and businesses get nervous in a down economy. And they need the help. In a bad economy, you need a seat at the table. You can't walk away."

Four lobbying groups at the Capitol earned more than \$1 million, according to financial disclosure reports filed last week for the first quarter of the year. It's unclear exactly how much money lobbyists brought in, because they are required to report their earnings in increments of \$10,000.

That means the lobbyists earned a minimum of \$19.7 million and a maximum of \$45 million.

Since the two-month legislative session straddles two quarters, lobbyists earned even more money to influence legislators and Gov. Charlie Crist's administration during the entire session that ended May 8.

The lobbyist disclosure reports aren't the only measure of the cost of doing business in Tallahassee. Also in the first quarter of the year, 108 politicians in the state Capitol who are

running for office raised a record \$4 million in campaign contributions.

A large chunk of that campaign money came from many of the lobbyists and corporations that sought lawmakers' help. The top contributors also hired the most paid advocates and hail from the telecommunications, health, energy, tobacco, gambling and insurance industries.

Former Senate President Tom Lee said he successfully pushed for the lobbyist disclosure system in 2005 to give citizens a glimpse into what happens in the Capitol.

"A reason lobbying is relatively recession-proof is that most of what the Legislature does is referee fistfights between special interest groups. And those never go away," he said.

Lee said hiring a lobbyist is a type of "investment."

He said the money flowing through the Capitol, coupled with a grand jury report criticizing the budget process, should be an eye-opener for Floridians.

"It's hard for people to think of the power the Legislature has over the life and death of a business," he said. "Just changing the word 'may' to 'shall' in statute can either earn or cost a corporation tens of millions of dollars."

A lobbyist's assistance is crucial in helping clients state their case to legislators and navigate the brief lawmaking session. This year, there was more competition for state dollars because the state had less money. Many corporations felt more need than ever to play defense as legislators settled on raising \$2.2 billion in higher taxes and fees to balance the \$66.5 billion budget.

Corporations also competed for a rare prize this session: a piece of the \$13.4 billion in federal stimulus money that Washington made available to the state over three years.

"Washington has replaced Wall Street as the nation's financial nerve center," said Brian Ballard, a top lobbyist whose firm earned more than \$1 million.

"And Tallahassee, while we're not printing money, has become a focal point for Florida corporate interests, who are making sure they're not going to bear the brunt of fixing the hole in Florida's budget," he said.

Case in point: the tobacco industry. It spent as much as much as \$689,000 on lobbyists to fight a new tax.

Though lawmakers ultimately approved a \$1-a-pack cigarette tax, the cigar industry escaped taxation. The big tobacco companies made sure to walk away with something: the right to post a lower amount of bond money when they appeal judgments in cases brought by sick smokers.

Not every business was playing defense.

Telecom giant AT&T hired more than three dozen lobbyists and spent as much as \$1 million, more than any other company. It sought to persuade legislators to give phone companies the right to raise rates more quickly. A stripped-down version of the legislation passed. An AT&T spokesman declined to comment.

As legislators considered expanding gambling, gaming interests spent a maximum of about \$1.3 million on lobbyists. The energy industry, seeking more incentives for alternative fuels, spent about \$1.4 million.

U.S. Sugar Corp. also sought a piece of the alternative-energy legislation, which died. The company spent the second-highest individual sum on lobbyists, up to \$476,000, as it protected an Everglades buyout of its lands.

U.S. Sugar spokesman Robert Coker said the money was well spent. "You need to make sure you're well represented," he said.

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Big money in lobbying

The companies that spent the most* to lobby the Legislature:

AT&T.....	\$979,992
U.S. Sugar Corp.	\$405,994
Florida Power & Light Co.	\$269,997
FCCI Insurance Group.....	\$254,996
State Farm Insurance.....	\$204,998**

These firms were the only four to report earning more than \$1 million in the first quarter of 2009:

Gray Robinson PA

Ronald L. Book PA

Smith & Ballard

Southern Strategy Group

*Dollar figures are an average of the high and low amounts of fees reported by lobbyists.

**Includes both State Farm Florida Insurance Co. and State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co.

Source: Florida state records

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Community Conversations: We're looking for citizen editorial board members

[Return to Top](#)

05/24/2009

News-Press

Plazas, David

Three field trips over the last five months have broadened The News-Press editorial board's understanding of important and newsy issues in our region.

On Jan. 22, we visited U.S. Sugar's fields and plant in Clewiston to better understand the deal Florida brokered with the company to buy land for Everglades restoration.

The original deal was \$1.7 billion for 180,000 acres. The economy and dwindling revenue caused a downsizing to \$536 million for 73,000 acres, which the South Florida Water Management District approved May 13.

On April 15, we took a tour of Babcock Ranch to visit the site of a planned 75-megawatt solar plant envisioned by Kitson & Partners and Florida Power & Light to create world's largest solar city.

Sadly, the Legislature did not approve a bill that would have let the plant be built this year.

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The last field trip was May 11, and it was to Ave Maria University's campus near Immokalee, where we visited the impressive oratory and met with founder Tom Monaghan to discuss the future of the university and the town around it.

These hands-on tours are important because our role as editorial board members cannot be only to sit at the boardroom table to pontificate.

We need to be engaged with our community.

During these past few months, we have had opportunities to help coordinate a Hunger Stakeholders Meeting and organize live broadcasts on news-press.com with newsmakers such as Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, Lee schools Superintendent James Browder, six Southwest Florida legislators and Lee County commission Chairman Ray Judah on the Red Sox stadium issue.

On June 30, the six-month term of our current citizen members comes to an end, and we are now soliciting new members to take their place.

Amy Davies, Brian Lucas and Raymond Rodrigues have provided great insight and participated in debates that have helped establish our positions on issues related to the economy, land use, and transportation.

Davies is the finance director for transportation consultant Wilbur Smith & Associates and ran the budget for the Lee County Department of Transportation for nearly 30 years.

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