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## **COLUMN: Martin's watershed moment**

07/19/2009

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Palm Beach Post

Swartz, Sally

Every once in a while, politicians listen to the people. Martin County had such a moment last week.

Environmentalists stood beside developers and Realtors to plead for a common cause: Clean river water. County commissioners voted 4-1, with only Doug Smith dissenting, to join 38 waterfront property owners suing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to stop discharges of Lake Okeechobee's polluted water into the St. Lucie River. The county joins Stuart and Sewall's Point in filing a brief supporting the property owners' quest for \$50-million in property damages the discharges caused.

In 1998, Henry Caimotto of the Snook Nook Bait & Tackle Shop in Jensen Beach gathered 30,000 petition signatures demanding an end to discharges that degrade the rivers. That year, lake discharges sickened and killed fish and water birds and chased away tourists. The lawsuit has been ongoing since 2005. Why pressure the county to join in now? Because with Lake Okeechobee at more than 13 feet and a wetter-than-usual forecast for the summer, water managers are poised to open the gates again.

"Enough is enough," Florida Sportsman founder and editor Karl Wickstrom said. "Remember the green slime of 2005? It's coming back." On Thursday, the corps started "pulse" releases from the St. Lucie Locks of water drained from local lands. Next week, water managers again talk about lake discharges.

Four years ago, hurricanes stirred up pollution from Lake O's bottom and the overflow went to the rivers, turning the water brown and coating the surface in neon green algae. Health officials posted signs warning residents not to touch the water. While Florida plans to buy U.S. Sugar lands so that more excess lake water can slide south on a slow, cleansing journey before it gets to the Everglades, those plans won't help this year.

Several speakers pointed out that \$4 million in federal stimulus money, planned for a project to use oysters to clean the St. Lucie, will be wasted if discharges resume. If too much fresh water hits the estuary, where fresh and salt water mix, oysters die.

Commissioner Patrick Hayes said residents' concern made him decide to support the lawsuit. Residents who also worry about the commission accepting Future Group's rewrite of the county's growth plan hope the commissioners are just as responsive Tuesday, when the commission decides whether to accept the group's proposals. They would allow as many as 300,000 homes in western Martin instead of the 10,000 possible under existing rules. Other proposals remove protections for residential neighborhoods.

The Local Planning Agency approved several Future Group items at the end of a long public hearing July 9, acting after most residents had left. After a meeting that dragged on past 7 p.m. five days ago, commissioners listened to residents who urged them to postpone action until Tuesday.

More than 1,000 residents have written and e-mailed commissioners, urging them to reject Future Group's ideas. That concern made a difference on protecting the river. It must make a difference in protecting the growth plan.

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## US Sugar purchase moves forward

07/20/2009

Okeechobee News

Gawda, Pete

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It was a busy morning for members of the County Coalition for Responsible Management of Lake Okeechobee, St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries and Lake Worth Lagoon. They met in Okeechobee Friday morning July 17 and heard updates on the 2009 legislature, the acquisition of U. S. Sugar property for Everglades res-toration and water and economic development.

The coalition is made up of county commissioners represent-ing Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin, Lee, Palm Beach, Hendry, Glades, Highlands, Osceola and Polk coun-ties.

Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah reported that his county had passed an ordinance prohibiting the use of fertilizers containing phosphorus from June to Septem-ber to cut down on phosphorous runoff.

Commissioner Russel Echols of Glades County expressed a desire that counties be paid in perpetuity a fair and just fee to compensate for property taken off the tax roles to be used in for Everglades resto-ration.

Ernie Barnett, director of legisla-tive affairs for South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), gave the coalition an overview of recent legislation that would ben-efit conservation causes.

He explained the new legisla-tion that directs the executive di-rector of SFWMD to sign permits rather than requiring approval of the board of governors.

" To me that is an unmitigated disaster," stated Commissioner Judah.

Mr. Barnett noted that there would be public meetings with the executive director before permits are approved and that if a permit is denied, it could be appealed to the board of governors.

Martin County Commissioner Sarah Heard expressed the opin-ion that the change would make it harder to track permits.

Mr. Barnett also gave an update on the purchase of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration. The purchase of 180,000 acres was announced last June. This land was to be used to increase water storage, deliver cleaner water to the Everglades, prevent tons of phosphorous from entering the Everglades, eliminate the need for back pumping and the sustainable of agriculture and green energy production.

In December the purchase price of \$1.34 billion was ap-proved. However, earlier this year the purchase was scaled down in order to be affordable, prevent any new taxes, sustain agriculture and minimize the impact to local communities.

The revised agreement calls for purchase of 73,000 acres for \$536 million with an option to purchase the remaining 107,000 acres during the first 10 years. The closing date for the sale is set to occur 90 days after bond validation. This is predicted to be sometime between April and June of next year.

" These lands were handpicked by our engineers," Mr. Barnett said of the smaller purchase.

Of the land purchased, 3,000 acres will be available for local government use. To ease the economic impact of the loss of agricultural lands, SFWMD is spending \$2 million in fiscal year 2009 in Hendry and Glades counties and the tri-cities of Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay. The district will be committing additional funds to economic development of the area including hiring of an economic development director and regional coordination.

According to the amended agreement, U.S. Sugar can lease back part of the land for agricultural use for up to 20 years.

Temperince Morgan discussed the planning that is going into the project. To date 10 water resource advisory commission workshops have been held as part of Phase I to discuss such topics as identifying problems, objectives and constraints, modelling tools, maps and land information. Several hypothetical configurations were examined. Phase II will soon start. This will involve using the findings of Phase I as a starting point for more detailed planning and analysis.

Susan Sylvester, director of operations for SFWMD, stated the period November through May was the driest six month period on record. However, May and June have been the wettest months since 1932. So far, rainfall in July has been slightly above average.

" There is nobody in this room that can say where we will go from here," she added.

The coalition also heard from private consultant Forest Michael on water and economic development. He gave examples of how lakes and reservoirs can be used for water treatment and storage as well as eco-tourism activities such as fishing, canoeing and bird watching. He stated that lakes and reservoirs can store excess water cheaper than some of the other methods proposed. He noted that all ten counties in the coalition have lakes and that in addition to being affordable, his method benefited the community.

Commissioner Judah stated that the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program is a dismal failure because there is not enough water storage. Coalition members expressed so much interest in Mr. Michael's presentation that they decided to devote the entire agenda of their next meeting to that topic.

Col. Paul Grosskruger, commander of the Jacksonville District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will soon retire. The coalition passed a resolution commending the colonel for his work on Lake Okeechobee and Everglades restoration issues and expressed the desire that the Department of the Army, the Department of the Interior and the State of Florida consider appointing Col. Grosskruger to a position where he can continue to work with Everglades restoration.

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## **EDITORIAL: Work out Everglades Glitch**

07/18/2009

Palm Beach Post

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Despite complaints that Gov. Crist's buyout of U.S. Sugar is slowing Everglades restoration, the truth is just the opposite: Federal money is beginning to flow and projects stalled for years are moving. Only now a bureaucratic snafu threatens to stop the work before it begins.

As The Post reported, a master agreement to govern how costs are shared between the South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is on hold after one side, the water district, thought that the work was done. Talks began seven years ago and, both sides agree, were completed in April. The water district board signed off last month. Yet at a meeting last week, the board learned that corps' lawyers not involved in negotiations had made significant changes to the document.

To the board, it looked like bureaucratic overkill with real-life consequences. "These people," board member Shannon Estenoz said, referring to lawyers who changed the document, "are like the fourth branch of government. These people cannot tell President Obama, 'Don't restore the Everglades.' They can't tell the Congress, 'Don't restore the Everglades.' They can't tell the Florida governor not to restore the Everglades. But they don't have to. Because you know what they do? They sit in their offices and wait for stuff like this to hit them. Then when it hits them, that's when they exercise their power."

All a big misunderstanding, said Stuart Appelbaum, the corps' Everglades program manager. Both sides will go point-by-point over the changes next week. Despite the water district's claim, he said, terms were not changed. It was standard practice, he said, to have "another set of eyes" look at the document. "The intent," he said, "was not to go back on things that had been negotiated."

In his presentation to the board, district Deputy Executive Director Ken Ammon listed three areas where terms were changed, calling for the district to pick up costs assigned to its federal partners. Working out the differences, he said, could delay federal projects, such as restoring natural water flow in the Picayune Strand in Collier County, part of a recent and long-awaited \$82 million congressional authorization.

The corps is under the interim command of Terrence "Rock" Salt, a former Jacksonville corps commander and Department of Interior Everglades official. So Washington understands the unique nature of the Everglades partnership and how difficult it has been to get federal money flowing. With Mr. Salt's help, this ridiculous disruption can get resolved quickly so the work of Everglades restoration finally can begin.

