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COLUMN: Exploiters, and proud of it

10/29/2009

Palm Beach Post

Engelhardt, Joel

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How dare 1000 Friends of Florida demand that Palm Beach County commissioners stop promoting economic exploitation of the Everglades Agricultural Area - that vast expanse of sugar cane fields - just to protect the Everglades?

Who do those tree-hugging liberals think they are? Unlike them, the commissioners aren't growth-averse, good-for-nothing environmentalists. Should they have to stop progress because someone is trying to save a national park?

A county commission majority knows that mining rock to build roads is more important than preserving some "River of Grass." Who needs a "River of Grass" when you can have industry and commerce? Commissioners don't care if they make Everglades restoration harder or more expensive if it means providing jobs in a region where unemployment reaches 40 percent. Saving the Everglades is not the county commission's job.

Yet here comes 1000 Friends of Florida, that Tallahassee-based growth antagonist, with a 20-page report, released Wednesday, on "Planning Strategies for the Everglades Agricultural Area." How dare they tell the Palm Beach County Commission to put a distant national park - and sustainable drinking water sources for South Florida - ahead of commerce?

Sure, the county has outsized power when it comes to shaping Everglades restoration. With 500,000 acres of the 700,000-acre Everglades Agricultural Area in Palm Beach County, it doesn't matter to commissioners if they come off as a national embarrassment. That is how the 1000 Friends document makes them look, with its description of an uncertain restoration pockmarked by irreversible, damaging provincial decisions.

And don't just say those decisions all came under the old commission of now-imprisoned Mary McCarty and Warren Newell. No, the new commission is capable of siding with mining over the environment. Just look at the 4-3 vote last week to allow a 600-acre expansion of the Star Ranch mine. Voting in favor: Jeff Koons, Burt Aaronson, Steven Abrams and Priscilla Taylor.

How can commissioners be expected to see the big picture? They're elected for what they deliver to constituents. Sometimes, those constituents are corporate executives represented by friendly lobbyists. Why not extract minerals from 80-foot holes over thousands of acres? Why not allow a freight rail yard - a so-called inland port - to assure jobs and a continuing industrial presence in the restoration heartland?

After all, it's not the county's fault or the mining companies' fault that Gov. Crist wants to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar, throwing Everglades restoration planning on its head. So what if that land wasn't available when the Everglades plans were drawn up? Who cares if the plans submitted so far for U.S. Sugar land amount to little more than scratchings on the back of a napkin? Commissioners must realize what the miners and landowners surely know: If mines and a freight yard are put in place now, Everglades restoration will have to find a way around them later.

How dare 1000 Friends of Florida, which doesn't own land or engage in commerce, say the county should submit itself to regional planning for an area of regional importance? Don't they know there's a recession going on?

The bottom line is that commissioners have elections to think about. It's hard to wait for an environmental miracle when lobbyists offer rewards in the here and now. The result, as it always has been, is that the Everglades Agricultural Area will be carved up to meet the needs of business first and Everglades restoration second, if at all. Isn't that why Florida is in this predicament in the first place?

The commission's decision to let mines, landfills and rail yards dot the Everglades Agricultural Area surely will outlive most readers' lifetimes. That's what really matters, right?

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Everglades at mercy of county, group says

10/29/2009

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Sarasota Herald-Tribune - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

Are decisions at local level undermining the state's investment?

WEST PALM BEACH - A high-profile growth watchdog group called on the state of Florida Wednesday to rein in the Palm Beach County Commission, whose land use decisions, they fear, will cripple the multibillion-dollar Everglades restoration.

The group, 1000 Friends of Florida, wants the state to form a committee of stakeholders to weigh the environmental and economic issues and write up development guidelines for the Everglades Agricultural Area, a 700,000-acre region of former Everglades marsh south of Lake Okeechobee that was drained to create farmland.

Efforts are under way by the state and federal governments to use land in the area to restore the southward flow of water from the lake into the parched Everglades. Creating the committee would diminish the role of the Palm Beach County Commission, which now controls land use in much of the region.

The group pointed to the commission's endorsement Oct. 22 of 600 acres of additional rock mining at Star Ranch and a proposal by sugar grower Florida Crystals, owned by the Fanjuls of Palm Beach, to develop a sprawling distribution complex -- both of which are next to land the state wants to use to repair the Everglades.

"The county commission is seven people and they're making a decision that's going to affect the entire future of agriculture and Everglades restoration in the EAA," Joanne Davis, of 1000 Friends of Florida, said in a telephone conference with reporters. "They're making land use decisions and I don't think they're fully armed with all the science and all of the facts."

Charles Pattison, the head of 1000 Friends of Florida, called on the state to form a committee of landowners, businesses, environmental groups and local governments -- including representatives of Palm Beach County -- who could draw up guidelines that would balance the needs of the Everglades against economic interests to draw up land development guidelines.

That could also mean designating the region an Area of Critical State Concern -- similar to the Florida Keys and the Big Cypress Swamp -- which would give the state a much larger role in land use decision-making.

"The idea of making piecemeal decisions on development proposals is simply not going to be in the best interest of the EAA in the long run," said Pattison.

The move comes as big plans are under way to at once develop and restore portions of the EAA. Gov. Charlie Crist is pushing to close a \$536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. to buy farmland in the area to use for Everglades restoration.

Meanwhile, the Port of Palm Beach is moving forward, despite objections from the state, with plans to develop an inland port, envisioned as a 3,500-acre transportation and distribution hub that would serve as an off-site expansion of South Florida's three seaports. Florida Crystals' wants to develop the complex on its land -- a plan that Palm Beach County Commissioners have endorsed.

Growth watchdog group asks state to leash county, protect Everglades

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