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Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
<a href="#">Palm Beach County trying to stop state from taking inland port, jobs also coveted by St. Lucie Count</a>	11/09/2009	TCPalm.com	ANDY REID Sun
<a href="#">State leaders add to concerns about Palm Beach County's planned inland port</a>	11/09/2009	Sun Sentinel - Online	Andy Reid
<a href="#">Florida's unemployment extremes share an uphill battle</a>	11/08/2009	St. Petersburg Times	Trigaux, Robert
<a href="#">INLAND PORT PLAN TURNS INTO BATTLE OVER JOBS</a>	11/07/2009	Sun Sentinel	
<a href="#">Inland port supporters rally for Palm Beach County site</a>	11/06/2009	Palm Beach Post - Online	JENNIFER SORENTTRUE
<a href="#">Let state shape Everglades</a>	11/06/2009	Palm Beach Post - Online	

## Palm Beach County trying to stop state from taking inland port, jobs also coveted by St. Lucie Count

[Return to Top](#)

11/09/2009  
TCPalm.com  
ANDY REID Sun

Posted November 9, 2009 at 11:44 a.m.

Political wrangling threatens to hijack a proposed "inland port" counted on to become a job-producing lifeline for Glades communities struggling with 40 percent unemployment, say frustrated Palm Beach County officials.

County Commissioner Priscilla Taylor and a group of more than 30 representatives from South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee gathered Friday at the Port of Palm Beach to rally support for putting the proposed industrial distribution center in western Palm Beach County.

Taylor and the group fear state officials are trying to steer the project, originated by the Port of Palm Beach, away from Palm Beach County sugar cane land in favor of putting it near Clewiston in Hendry County.

Also a finalist for the inland port: The Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus, which is located west of Port St. Lucie. The industrial distribution center that could bring thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new state and local tax revenue to the winning location.

The St. Lucie County location, which would house a center that includes a freight yard that could have 20,000 jobs, has received public support from Port St. Lucie and Fort Pierce officials. The campus is the only finalist on the Treasure Coast and would be on a 7,000-acre piece of land that fronts Glades Cutoff Road and the rail line in western St. Lucie County.

The reason for concern over the Clewiston location is that Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed half-billion-dollar Everglades restoration land deal with Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar Corp. is putting pressure on state officials to attract businesses there to compensate for agricultural jobs that could be lost as sugar production gives way to environmental projects.

The answer shouldn't be taking the inland port that South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee are counting on to deal with existing unemployment, Taylor said. She called it "disconcerting" that the state would try to use the inland port project to "backfill" agricultural jobs that possibly could be lost in Clewiston.

"It really just makes no sense," Taylor said. "The need for these jobs has never been greater."

The inland port distribution center would connect the Port of Palm Beach, Port Everglades in Broward County and the Port of Miami. It would allow for delivering cargo to and from the coast via truck routes and rail lines crisscrossing the state and linking with routes to the rest of the country.

Land owned by sugar producer Florida Crystals along U.S. 27 in western Palm Beach County is competing against two sites near Clewiston and the site west of Port St. Lucie. One of the Clewiston sites is a partnership between U.S. Sugar and Hilliard Brothers.

State officials in October succeeded in getting the Port of Palm Beach to delay until next month a decision on where to build the inland port. State agencies have arranged a meeting Monday in Clewiston to discuss the four sites vying for the port project.

Environmental groups object to the proposed Florida Crystals site, saying it threatens to get in the way of Everglades restoration.

Port of Palm Beach officials on Friday maintained that they still have the power to decide where the project goes and that Monday's meeting coordinated by the state is not an attempt to take over.

But Monday's meeting has Glades communities concerned the state is laying the groundwork to put the distribution center in Clewiston. Community leaders see the inland port as the answer to decades of economic hardship that now leaves the three cities suffering with unemployment hovering near 40 percent.

"There's an atrocity that is taking place in the Glades," said state Rep. Mack Bernard, a Democrat whose District 84 seat includes the Glades communities. "This is a state of emergency. The people out in the Glades need jobs."

What could start with cargo storage and distribution on a few hundred acres is projected to grow to about 3,500 acres with spin-off businesses and as many as 20,000 jobs, according to port projections.

The goal is to have the inland port ready to receive cargo by 2014, when improvements to the Panama Canal are expected to allow larger shipments to Florida.

Glades community leaders are adamant that fallout from the state's Everglades land deal should not cost them the inland port project.

"We need to get the politics out of it and do the right thing," Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said.

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## State leaders add to concerns about Palm Beach County's planned inland port

[Return to Top](#)

11/09/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

Top state officials on Monday questioned the push to pick the site for an inland port that Palm Beach County communities are counting on to ease decades of crushing unemployment.

The Port of Palm Beach next month is set to choose from four sites vying to become home to an industrial distribution center that would link coastal ports to rail and truck routes nationwide — potentially generating thousands of jobs for the inland community that lands the prize.

On Monday, the heads of the state Department of Environmental Protection as well as the Department of Transportation held a meeting in Clewiston to discuss their concerns about the hurdles still facing the inland port project.

Questions about how to address the infrastructure needs of moving cargo from the coast to the inland storage and distribution center have yet to be resolved; as well as concerns that the industrial development could get in the way of Everglades restoration, said Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

"We are in a tenuous position," Sole said. "We all need to take a step back."

Palm Beach County officials want their hometown port to choose western farmland along U.S. 27 owned by sugar producer Florida Crystals. That could provide much needed jobs for South Bay, Pahokee and Belle Glade where unemployment hovers near 40 percent.

Competing communities struggling with their own unemployment want the state to step in to play a larger role in determining which location best fits regional economic needs.

The inland port vote planned for Dec. 17 also comes before the results of a study expected in February about state freight flows. Challenges could arise if the Port of Palm Beach picks a site that doesn't match up with the results of the study, said Stephanie Kopelousos, secretary of the Florida Department of Transportation.

Sole and Kopelousos both acknowledged that the Port of Palm Beach started the inland port push and gets to pick the site. But they said regional concerns must be addressed for the project to succeed.

Kopelousos said she "wouldn't be shocked" if at least one of the four competing sites asked for a delay of the Dec. 17 vote to try to address more of the concerns about the project.

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## Florida's unemployment extremes share an uphill battle

11/08/2009

St. Petersburg Times

Trigaux, Robert

Nov. 8--On the surface, Liberty County in Florida's Panhandle and Hendry County in South Florida have plenty in common. They are rural with small populations. But Liberty's unemployment rate is 5.3 percent while Hendry's is 16.8 percent -- 11.5 percentage points higher.

Why the astounding difference?

To answer that question, we looked at the five Florida counties with the lowest jobless rates and the five with the highest. They stretch from Destin to Key West. What emerges are snapshots of an enormously challenged but resilient Florida and perhaps some important lessons for the entire state.

First, riding the real estate and construction boom while failing to diversify is a sure ticket to desperate times. Second, agriculture products from oysters, shrimp and citrus to potatoes, sugar and vegetables remain a hugely important slice of the state economy. Third, alternative energy and biomass plants are cropping up surprisingly often across the state though their sources of fuel vary widely.

And fourth, every last person I interviewed demonstrated a "we shall get through this downturn and we shall prosper" attitude that speaks well for Floridians and should bolster the confidence in our state economy -- including Tampa Bay, which is wrestling with its own 11.7 jobless rate.

Turn to Page 6D to see how 10 very different counties are coping in this economy.

[Return to Top](#)

## Counties with highest unemployment:

### Hendry

The highest unemployment rate (16.8 percent) among Florida's 67 counties is one bragging right that interim county economic development director Ron Zimmerly would gladly skip. Hendry is seriously dependent on agriculture, from citrus and sugar cane to cattle and row crops. Citrus is fighting two attacks -- canker and greening -- while the sugar business was upended by the on-again, off-again deal by the South Florida Water Management District to buy a vast land tract from U.S. Sugar in Clewiston.

If the deal goes through, look at 1,100 more lost jobs and the end of as many as 20,000 indirect jobs, Zimmerly said. But Hendry's got some options. Alternative energy firm Southeast Renewables signed a deal to produce ethanol from sweet sorghum to generate electricity for Tampa's Seminole Electric Cooperative. And Hendry is competing to build an intermodal/logistics center that would service the Port of Palm Beach.

"That could possibly be a perfect replacement for our lost U.S. Sugar jobs," reasons Zimmerly. He puts Hendry's chances at "better than 50-50."

### Flagler

Doug Baxter's friendly Australian accent can take only so much of the rough edge off a 16.2 percent unemployment rate. That's 5,068 lost jobs. The county chamber of commerce chief has close ties to New York and New Jersey folks who want to retire to Flagler but can't sell their homes up North. Flagler's biggest town, 75,000-strong Palm Coast, is only 10 years old and focused much of its retiree marketing on those two Northeast states way up Interstate 95.

"We put all our eggs in one basket -- housing," Baxter says. The "good news" is Flagler home prices have dropped so much that some folks up North can now afford them without first selling their first homes.

Go west in Flagler, away from the Atlantic beaches (where Flagler tourism is down 18 percent), for an agriculture surprise. Flagler's got big potato farms, with almost all the harvest going to Lay's for potato chips. Mother Nature mashed this year's potato crop with close to 30 inches of rain. Says Baxter: "We're resilient."

### St. Lucie

It boomed in the post-2004 clean-up of Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne but became addicted to construction jobs; bad news when housing tanked, sending the county unemployment rate to 15.3 percent. But Linda Cox, county chamber of commerce CEO, has a new mantra: diversify. And she has proof it's working.

"Biotech cluster." If there are two words more alluring to modern Florida economic developers, I have yet to hear them. Just as Scripps Research put its much touted Florida facility in Palm Beach County to the south, St. Lucie lured Torrey Pines Institute, which begat the Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute which begat the Mann Foundation building a biotech facility just to capture the likely spinoffs from the first two research firms.

Add in call centers for QVC and Liberty Medial, and St. Lucie counts 2,500 jobs in its pipeline in the coming years. Just don't ask about construction. "Nobody's building much of anything right now," Cox says. "I don't know if we've hit bottom, but I hope what we see now is it."

### Indian River

Economic development director Helene Caseltine explains a daunting 15.2 percent jobless rate by saying citrus, tourism, construction and real estate are no longer enough horsepower.

Like St. Lucie County to the south on I-95, Indian River is keen on grabbing a piece of the biotech promise. When Scripps Research first came to the state five years ago searching for locations, the quartet of St. Lucie, Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee counties united to brand themselves the "Research Coast." St. Lucie's a big winner so far, but Caseltine hopes Indian River can attract spinoffs. The county's big win recently is defensive. After decades in Vero Beach, Piper Aircraft, the county's biggest private employer, considered relocation. A full-court press kept it happy where it is. Ahead, the most promising project may be a biomass plant that will burn trash, due by early 2010.

Economic development, she says, is extremely competitive. "We're not competing with Alachua or Escambia counties but Ireland and Vietnam."

### Lee County

The largest among the 10 counties considered in this economic series and the home of Fort Myers and housing-ravaged Cape Coral, Lee is bracing for a long-term recovery. The county's unemployment rate of 13.9 percent is well below Hendry and Flagler, but because this is a higher-population county, those who are without jobs make up a big number.

Gary Jackson, Florida Gulf Coast University economics professor and director of the Regional Economic Research Institute in Fort Myers, closely tracks Lee County economic trends. The intensity of southwest Florida's boom times -- no other part of Florida roared so hot -- contributed to the severity of overabundant housing, foreclosures and short sales. Tourism is down, too, though the coming winter season should give a seasonal boost to the area at least until the snowbirds leave.

"Right now people understand the recession is over, but it will be a long and gradual recovery," Jackson says. "That is a concern to folks."

Counties with lowest unemployment:

#### Liberty

How can such a rural county southwest of Tallahassee boast a 5.3 percent unemployment rate -- less than a third that of Hendry or Flagler counties -- in such a recession? Mother Nature provides. Apalachicola National Forest covers half of Liberty and "wood" drives much of its economy. That ranges from a Georgia Pacific mill making a plywood substitute called "oriented strand board" to a biomass plant that generates 14 megawatts of electricity and promises more to come. Liberty's big employer, though, is a state prison.

A born-and-bred Liberty man, 77-year-old Johnny Eubanks is both chamber chief and publisher of the Calhoun Liberty Journal. The weekly newspaper's unusual challenge is reporting on Liberty, in the eastern time zone, and Calhoun County next door in the central time zone.

"Nearly everyone in Liberty that wants a job has a job," Eubanks says. "There may be a few that want a better job. But if they want to go to work, they can find themselves a job."

#### Walton

Bill Arnett used to pitch business on struggling eastern Ohio. So he's in heaven now that he's spent the last four months directing this Panhandle county's economic development alliance. With only 6.8 percent unemployed -- more than 4 percentage points below Florida's state average -- Walton is a huge beneficiary of the defense industry. Eglin Air Force Base in nearby Okaloosa County was a winner in the Defense Department's "BRAC" (Base Realignment and Closure) commission recommendations because the 7th Special Forces, now at Fort Bragg, will relocate to Eglin in 2011.

"It's a big deal," Arnett says. Economic ripples will boost Walton as defense companies cluster near Eglin and more services handle a growing military population.

Tourism's big, too. Arnett says the coming Bay County airport nearby will bring more people. But the Midwest transplant winces when he hears of Hendry County's 16.8 percent jobless rate -- the state's highest. Says Arnett: "That sounds like Ohio."

#### Monroe

If there's a ground zero for tourism, Monroe is it. And tourist-wise, Monroe has been on a good roll, enjoying hotel occupancy rates north of 80 percent and well above the state average. Add that to the county's relatively low 7 percent unemployment rate and what's not to like?

Not all is quite what it seems, says Monroe County administrator Roman Gastesi. People are leaving Monroe after the real estate decline, because there are few construction jobs and, Gastesi notes, "this is an expensive county to live in." That exodus helps the jobless rate look better, but it does not make the economy more vibrant.

Housing prices are down on average from \$400,000 to \$300,000, though the volume of home sales has started to pick up. Fishing-related business is down. Take lobsters. Last year, they retailed at \$12.99 a pound. Now they're \$4.99 a pound as people tighten their belts.

Monroe's tourism win? Committing an extra penny to advertising, which Gastesi says prompted lots of people to

"rediscover" the Keys. "So we are okay," he says, "but the gravy is gone."

Franklin

"We farm oysters here," says Anita Grove, who heads the Apalachicola Bay Chamber of Commerce in Franklin County. The county's modest 4,600-person work force has a 7.1 percent jobless rate with county government and an area hospital among the larger employers. Nearly 89 percent of the county's land is owned by the state or federal government. But oystering and shrimping are the life and soul of this county on the bay.

There's just one catch. The federal Food and Drug Administration is pushing for a ban on the sale of raw oysters from May to September to reduce the threat of serious illness to people with weak immune systems. With raw oyster bars prominent in the area (and across Florida) and 1,400 licensed oystermen in Franklin County alone, Grove says this "unilateral" FDA proposal would strangle the county economy.

"It was a big surprise. You're talking about putting thousands out of work with no chance for discussion," she said.

Alachua

No other county among Florida's 67 and so distant from a major metro area enjoys an 800-pound gorilla like this one. It's called the University of Florida in Gainesville, an economic engine any other county would die for. The good news is that UF helps keep a jobless rate manageable at 7.1 percent. The bad news is it's tough to diversify Alachua's economy with businesses not tied to the Home of the Gators or the nearby Shands hospital system. That's education and health, two positive growth sectors in this recession.

Alachua also is home to two business incubators: the Sid Martin biotech incubator affiliated with UF, and GTEC, the Gainesville Technology Enterprise Center. "We've seen a number of companies graduate from these facilities," said Alachua chamber CEO Brent Christensen, a Tampa transplant. "Some move into Gainesville and some have left."

When Enterprise Rent-A-Car opened a claims service center in the county earlier this year, Christensen says they had 1,000 applicants for 120 openings.

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## INLAND PORT PLAN TURNS INTO BATTLE OVER JOBS

11/07/2009

Sun Sentinel

[Return to Top](#)

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"We need to get the politics out of it and do the right thing," Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said.

Andy Reid can be reached at [abreid@SunSentinel.com](mailto:abreid@SunSentinel.com) or 561-228-5504.

PHOTO: Map: locates industrial development proposal in Palm Beach County. Kwency Norman Sun Sentinel

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## Inland port supporters rally for Palm Beach County site

11/06/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post - Online

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE

RIVIERA BEACH — Palm Beach County Commissioner Priscilla Taylor teamed up with leaders from the Glades region on Friday, vowing to use their political muscle to make sure an inland port is developed on the south side of Lake Okeechobee.

The group, which included the mayors of Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay, said it makes no sense that the Port of Palm Beach would consider building the project outside of Palm Beach County.

Four sites have been proposed for the project. Only one of them is in Palm Beach County. Port commissioners are slated to make a selection Dec. 17.

"We need and we want the inland port in Palm Beach County," Taylor, a former port commissioner, said at a news conference at the Port of Palm Beach. "We are here today talking about this in Palm Beach County. Why would we have a body even consider not having this in Palm Beach County?"

Glades leaders say the development is needed to bring jobs to their impoverished region. In June, joblessness in South Bay reached 42 percent.

"This is a state of emergency," said State Rep. Mack Bernard, whose district includes the Glades. "If the unemployment continues, this is going to be a problem in eastern Palm Beach County."

The inland port concept calls for building a sprawling transportation, warehousing and distribution hub of at least 3,500 acres to serve as an off-site extension of South Florida's three seaports.

The finalists are Florida Crystals, which has offered up to 3,500 acres near its Okeelanta sugar mill and power plant south of South Bay; the Hilliard Brothers of Florida, which has partnered with U.S. Sugar Corp. with a Hendry County site that includes the AirGlades Airport; the Weekley Brothers Industrial Park in Clewiston; and the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus, a partnership of landowners that includes Ken Kennedy and his family, Indian River County citrus growers, and the Caruso family, longtime farmers and developers out of Orlando. Former Sen. Mel Martinez and former State Senate President Ken Pruitt are also partnered with the company pitching the St. Lucie County site.

The state's growth management agency last month denied land-use changes the Palm Beach County Commission approved for the Florida Crystals site south of Lake Okeechobee in western Palm Beach County. Among other factors, the agency cited state environmental regulators' concerns that development there could interfere with Everglades restoration.

Last month, Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mike Sole and Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos asked the port to hold off on where the transport hub might go and whether it is needed, until further study is completed.

Port officials initially dismissed their request, but later asked the four development companies to develop business plans for the project.

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## Let state shape Everglades

11/06/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post - Online

Letting the Palm Beach County Commission continue to make decisions that shape the Everglades is like letting the Los Alamos (N.M.) County Commission design the nation's nuclear weapons.

Commissioners allow themselves to be used by large landowners and rock-mining interests, approving permanent changes in the 700,000-acre Everglades Agricultural Area without taking into account the damage to Everglades restoration those changes may cause. Every time one of the commissioners asks the experts at the South Florida Water Management District a direct question - Will the mines get in the way of Everglades restoration plans? - they get back the same answer: No, not at this time. And the commission moves ahead with plans that, over time, will hurt the Everglades.

No one seems willing to state that Everglades restoration plans, not yet 10 years old, are functionally obsolete. The plans rely on storing huge amounts of water underground, science that was shaky a decade ago and is shakier now. In attempting to buy some of U.S. Sugar's vast holdings, Gov. Crist and the water district are trying a sensible alternative: storing water above ground. That means converting EAA farmland to water storage because it offers vast stretches of flat land. Without that water storage, Everglades restoration is a pipe dream. That reality makes the push from critics of the U.S. Sugar deal to pursue existing plans little more than a dodge.

Without plans that reflect the new reality, the Palm Beach County Commission shrugs and allows more obstacles. In addition to four mines consuming 16,000 acres, the commission is likely to go to court in support of Florida Crystals' right to build a rail yard and warehousing district on up to 3,500 acres. The commission, correctly, at least has halted its search for a landfill.

The effect, however, is that mining or warehouse districts, not science, is driving water storage decisions. Landowners say they can't wait for water managers to figure out the science. At the same time, rival growers work to block the U. S. Sugar sale, slowing the science. What is certain is that more than Palm Beach County's industrial growth is at stake.

For more than a year, environmental groups have proposed a state takeover of planning for the region. Last month, the growth management advocate 1000 Friends of Florida called for a cautious first step by creating a committee to bring the conflicting voices and state agencies together.

Farmers worry that the state's agenda is to seize their land and flood it in the name of Everglades restoration. Environmentalists worry that farmers seek to drive up the value of their land artificially. Certainly, though, the Palm Beach County Commission is not qualified to determine where to draw the line between commerce and the environment. That requires a regional perspective, and only the state can provide it.

