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For Gov. Charlie Crist, it's not easy being green

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St. Petersburg Times
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Charlie Crist's first two years as governor thrilled environmental activists. He helped block a coal-fired power plant from being built near the Everglades, halted a drive to take manatees off the state's endangered list and convened a summit in Miami to deal with global warming, vowing to make it an annual event.

"He was more green than any governor had ever been before," said David Guest of Earthjustice, an environmental law firm.

But since he launched his bid for a U.S. Senate seat this year, Crist has left environmentalists feeling jilted. He canceled his climate summit. He didn't fight the Legislature's move to end funding for the popular Florida Forever environmental land-buying program. He signed a controversial bill changing the state's growth management law. And he has all but endorsed a proposal to allow drilling for oil near Florida's gulf beaches.

What happened to the man they once called "Governor Green"?

"I think he's found it politically extremely difficult to follow his heart on green matters with (Republican primary challenger Marco) Rubio looming over him," Guest said.

The business leaders who now find Crist on their side on major environmental issues say they, too, consider his conversion politically driven.

"It's only because he's running for election to the Senate and he's up against Marco Rubio," said Barney Bishop, president of Associated Industries, a business group that has long criticized Crist's environmental positions. "This is not a serious change of heart."

Crist doesn't dispute that his positions have changed but says it's not because of his Senate bid.

"It has nothing to do with the race," Crist said. "It has everything to do with the economy."

If Florida's economy weren't in such poor shape, he explained, he would have no problem restarting Florida Forever, battling climate change and opposing offshore drilling. But right now, he said, "my first and foremost duty is to help this economy."

Told that four former governors — Reubin Askew, Bob Graham, Bob Martinez and Jeb Bush — have all called for him to reinstate funding for Florida Forever, Crist countered: "They're not in my shoes. They're not dealing with this

budget. I am."

'A leader controlling climate change'

In his first address to the Legislature in March 2007, Crist said global warming is "one of the most important issues that we will face this century."

He promised to "bring together the brightest minds" and "place our state at the forefront of a growing worldwide movement to reduce greenhouse gases."

Crist convened a two-day climate-change summit in Miami that attracted 600 participants, then announced far-reaching changes in the state's energy policies: cutting power plant emissions, requiring the use of alternate fuels and rewriting the building code to require more energy efficiency.

"I think that as a state, beautiful as Florida is, we need to be a leader controlling climate change and protecting our natural resources," Crist said then. "It's vital to Florida's future."

Crist's climate-change crusade got him national attention, with a write-up in Time magazine and an interview on the CBS Early Show. He shared a stage with singer Sheryl Crow and met with Robert Redford. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called him "another great action hero."

He held a second summit in 2008 and even flew to London to participate in climate-change talks with British leaders. Meanwhile, he halted a move by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to remove the manatee from the state's endangered list. And at his urging the Public Service Commission rejected a plan by the state's largest utility to build a \$5.7 billion coal-fired power plant near Everglades National Park.

"He started strong," said Manley Fuller of the Florida Wildlife Federation. But now "he's dealing with a different political environment."

Once Crist became a Senate candidate, his opponent in the Republican primary, former House Speaker Rubio, painted Crist's environmental moves as a liability among the right wing.

"I guarantee you he won't be touting the work he did with Sheryl Crow as part of his primary platform," Rubio said.

Sure enough, Crist canceled his 2009 summit, contending it would cost too much. Most of his global warming initiatives petered out in the face of opposition from the Legislature.

"He had the state positioned to be a leader," said Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon of Florida. "For two years people put in a lot of work (on Crist's initiatives). But in the end, the real stuff that would've made a difference . . . those things were not accomplished."

Then, despite strong lobbying by the environmental groups that had once praised him, he signed into law Senate Bill 360, which rewrites Florida's 25-year-old growth management law by allowing developers in the most urban counties to add more housing without expanding roads. Supporters said it would help stimulate the state's flagging construction and real estate industries.

And Crist said he would be "open-minded" about a proposal — backed by legislative leaders — to drill for oil within 3 miles of the state's beaches. The measure passed the House but died in the Senate.

"Crist could've been the hero on this," Draper said. "That would've been the perfect Charlie Crist moment."

Since Crist didn't oppose it, it's likely to come back up again in the session next spring.

Everglades is still a legacy move

No matter what else he does, Crist's successful push for a \$536 million deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. to buy 73,000 acres of its land to for Everglades restoration will always be remembered as one of his boldest environmental initiatives, said Fuller.

Even though the size of the buyout wound up being far smaller than Crist first promised, "that's probably the biggest legacy he'll have," agreed Guest of Earthjustice.

Crist — who is quick to mention his Everglades restoration initiative — insists he has not turned his back on environmental issues, despite what the activists may think.

"I hope my credentials on the environment are pretty clear," the governor said. "I care deeply about it and want to do everything I can to protect it."

Guest predicted that, if Crist beats Rubio in the Republican primary, he will revert to his old positions.

"I don't think Charlie's green politics were gambit," he said. "I think that was the real Charlie."

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Santamaria Support Independent Inspector

11/27/2009

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Town-Crier Newspapers, The

Bukley, Ron

Waste and corruption in Palm Beach County proves the need for an independent inspector general, County Commissioner Jess Santamaria said at his monthly community forum on Wednesday, Nov. 18. The inspector general's position will be discussed by the Palm Beach County Commission on Tuesday, Dec. 1, and Santamaria urged people attending the forum to get involved.

At the forum, Santamaria recalled his first three years as a county official.

"This month, I will complete three years in office," Santamaria said. "There's a lot of things that I knew what to expect, but a lot of the things I expected, I had to multiply by 10."

Two issues that have made significant impressions on him have been discovering how much money the county has wasted, and how effective public participation can be to hold officials accountable.

The recent decisions about a new waste-to-energy plant and landfill sites show examples of both, Santamaria said.

On Wednesday, Nov. 18, the commissioners, acting as the Solid Waste Authority Governing Board, heard a presentation about a waste-to-energy plant that could dramatically reduce waste volume and extend the life of the county's current landfill to the year 2045, he said.

One month earlier the commissioners were ready to purchase one of two landfill sites whose asking prices were millions over their appraised value. The SWA already owns a 1,600-acre site immediately west of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, which was later rejected as a future landfill site after environmentalists raised objections.

Six commissioners were at the SWA meeting Oct. 7, and they were very close to a vote in which Santamaria anticipated he would be the only negative vote against an overpriced land purchase. "I said we don't have to pick either of them," he recalled. "Throw them in the trash can. Start over, or get eminent domain and let the courts decide what is the true value."

Commissioner Karen Marcus supported a motion to postpone the decision until the county can negotiate a possible land swap with the South Florida Water Management District. In such a deal, the SFWMD would take the rejected SWA-owned site in exchange for some of the land it plans to purchase from U.S. Sugar.

"That gave us six months to get word out about this crazy price," Santamaria said. "We were able to generate an outcry. Three weeks after that, 30 or so residents finally screamed bloody murder. A lot of you showed up and spoke. We were able to talk commissioners into discarding the properties and waiting for South Florida Water Management District to proceed."

The postponement also enabled the presentation about the waste-to-energy plant, he noted. "It is a more efficient way of getting rid of garbage, using special equipment that burns garbage so it reduces mass by 95 percent," Santamaria said.

Santamaria said that if the county does adopt a mass burn program, it will alleviate the urgency to create a new landfill.

Santamaria wondered aloud where the county would be if he had remained quiet. "We would have another Mecca

Farms," he said, referring to the county's ill-fated purchase of land north of The Acreage for the Scripps Research Institute, which was later relocated to Palm Beach Gardens after the Mecca property fell to a lawsuit by environmentalists.

So far the county has spent over \$100 million on Mecca Farms, he noted.

"We knew about the lawsuit by environmentalists, and we started building the water lines for the infrastructure," Santamaria said. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. We have a lawsuit, and you're going to spend tens of millions of dollars to start putting in the improvements. When you have a lawsuit, you stop everything."

Santamaria said people complain to their elected officials about taxes, but if there is dishonesty in government, complaining will not matter. He said getting honesty in government calls for the adoption of the grand jury's recent recommendation for an independent inspector general to monitor government entities and the vendors that do business with them.

The current economic crisis was brought about by a combination of corruption, greed and waste, he charged. "It was a combination of the bankers, the mortgage companies, the appraisers and the Realtors, the flippers and the builders who kept raising the prices until the roof collapsed," Santamaria said. "Now, we're all suffering."

Santamaria cited several other examples of what he views as waste, including a county-owned golf course in Delray Beach, the renovation of the historic downtown courthouse and moving county offices to the Vista Center.

"Why are we competing with private golf courses?" he asked. "Why did we have to spend some \$14 million of your taxpayers' money on a golf course when we have golf courses going bankrupt?"

Spending \$49 million to move employees to the Vista Center on Jog Road off Okeechobee in 2006 was wasteful when the workforce is now so much smaller, he said.

"We've laid off a third of the employees because there's not much work for them," Santamaria said. "Why are taxes so high? Because we have a debt of \$1.3 billion. Why are taxes so high? Because we're giving away lots of money."

The grand jury recommendation to establish an independent inspector general is a necessary step to keep people honest, Santamaria said.

The county commission is in the process of formulating an ordinance to create such an office, and Santamaria stressed that the position must be independent. However, under the current proposal, the position would not be, he said. Ultimate control still lies with the commissioners — and with three commissioners being sent to jail since 2006, that type of arrangement is not appropriate, he said.

"They are going to hire, fire and fund the inspector general," Santamaria said. "My question, of course, is that independent?"

Several groups have been gathering petitions, speaking out, sending e-mails and writing letters to the newspaper, saying that the inspector general's position must be completely independent, Santamaria said. "I'm asking those of you here to do the same thing," he said, adding that he has petition forms for people to pick up and have signed.

The petitions must be filled out by Dec. 1 when a public workshop will be held for the draft ordinance to be discussed and the public will be able to speak. Final approval is scheduled for Dec. 15.

"It's most important to show up at the Dec. 1 meeting to say we have to have an independent inspector general," Santamaria stressed. "I don't think you're going to have honesty in government until you put some pressure on some people and force them to be honest."

LETTER: Growers' sugar bias won't help repair Everglades

11/25/2009

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I believe that George Wedgworth's bias in favor of Big Sugar over the environment showed in his letter criticizing the state's purchase of U.S. Sugar land (" 'Environmentalists' hinder Everglades restoration," Nov. 2).

Mr. Wedgworth, president of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, says "... U.S. Sugar will continue to farm the land for the next 20 years." Not true. U.S. Sugar has only a seven-year option to farm. The South Florida Water Management District has the rest of the 20-year option at its discretion, not U.S. Sugar's.

Regarding the inland port, he touts the Okeelanta site owned by Florida Crystals. Adding 3,500 acres of land to it, to be rezoned industrial from agricultural for the inland port, would put the project directly in the way of the "River of Grass." It would hamper Everglades restoration, as would any further development (rock mining, etc.) in the Everglades Agricultural Area. Mr. Wedgworth needs to acknowledge that nearly the entire EAA used to be the "River of Grass" before it was drained and depleted for sugar farming. Other, less environmentally damaging and more economically advantageous sites are available for the inland port, even in Palm Beach County.

Florida needs to declare the EAA an "Area of Critical State Concern" to continue the restoration effort we've already spent so much money on. Environmentalists simply want enough land back to restore the "River of Grass" and to repair (we know we can't fully restore) the Everglades. Without a flow way through the EAA, the Everglades and Florida Bay never will get enough fresh water to revive and survive, much less be restored. Get out of the way, Mr. Wedgworth.

TED GUY
Stuart

