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Treasure Coast not selected as site for major industrial distribution center

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12/18/2009
TCPalm.com
Eric Pfahler

RIVIERA BEACH — Treasure Coast officials were disappointed but not discouraged about finishing second in a bid to receive an inland port distribution center.

The Port of Palm Beach on Thursday awarded the Florida Crystals' site in western Palm Beach County the first rights to negotiate for the center.

If a contract cannot be reached, the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus would be next in line, port officials said.

The St. Lucie County location was planned on a 7,000-acre piece of land that fronts Glades Cutoff Road and the rail line in western St. Lucie County. The project is expected to create up to 20,000 jobs and bring in millions of dollars in new state and local tax revenue.

Port St. Lucie Vice Mayor Jack Kelly said it was an admirable effort despite becoming involved in the bidding later than other applicants.

"The good news is that we came in second. The bad news is we didn't come in first," Kelly said by phone.

Before a packed crowd that included state and local politicians, environmentalists and representatives from the four applicants, port commissioners scored the four bids based on economic development, location and environmental impact among other things. Florida Crystals scored 449 points, Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus scored 331, Hilliard Brothers of Florida/US Sugar Corporation scored 322 and Weekly Brothers Industrial Park scored 203 points. The last two sites are near Clewiston.

The vote came despite concerns from several environmentalists that the Florida Crystals' site would interfere with the efforts to restore the Everglades. The board delayed the vote from Oct. 21 to Thursday after the state Department of Community Affairs sent a letter about potential negative impacts on the environment.

Former chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission Paul Anderson represented the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus and spoke of the St. Lucie County site as a regional facility with the necessary transportation infrastructure, including rail and easy access to Florida's Turnpike and Interstate 95. Anderson also mentioned plans to hire from the Glades region.

"We need to be making a decision that will benefit our region today and be able to start tomorrow," Anderson said.

Former state Senate President Ken Pruitt attended the meeting on behalf of the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus. He said even if the St. Lucie County location does not receive the distribution center, work on the project will not go for naught.

"(The work) positions the Treasure Coast to be exactly where it needs to be for the future," Pruitt said.

The inland port is expected to open by 2014, in time for the expansion of the Panama Canal. The expansion will allow bigger shipments to come into Florida and the East Coast.

Port St. Lucie Mayor Patricia Christensen said the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus should not be tossed aside despite the tough news.

"I still believe that our site was the best selection," she said by phone. "It met all the criteria."

Port of Palm Beach picks Florida Crystals site for proposed inland port

12/18/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

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Port of Palm Beach picks Florida Crystals site for proposed inland port 9:23 p.m. |

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Toys for Tots short items on wish lists in Palm Beach, Martin counties 9:16 p.m.

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

RIVIERA BEACH — The Port of Palm Beach plowed ahead with plans to build Florida's first inland port, voting Thursday to partner in the potentially lucrative development deal with the most controversial applicant: Florida Crystals Corp.

But many, including one of the four applicants, questioned the impact of the vote, noting that two state agencies, whose buy-in and assistance experts say will be essential, have urged the port to slow down so the concept can be studied further.

The inland port plan — modeled after others already built or under construction in other states — calls for creating a 3,500-acre-or-larger warehousing and distribution center that would serve as an off-site expansion of South Florida's three crowded seaports.

Crystals, the politically connected sugar giant owned by the Fanjuls of Palm Beach, beat out three other heavyweight contenders for the massive infrastructure project.

Port commissioners ranked second a proposed a site in St. Lucie County, which is represented by former Sen. Mel Martinez and former State Sen. Ken Pruitt.

Third was a partnership between Hilliard Brothers and Crystals competitor U.S. Sugar Corp.

Last was the Weekley Brothers, who pitched an industrial park they own in Clewiston.

The Crystals site has drawn heavy fire from environmentalists for its location near land the state has purchased from U. S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. But Glades residents have promoted the site as a salve to the steep unemployment that plagues the region.

The controversy added more uncertainty to how the process will play out, as environmentalists have threatened to sue to block an inland port on Crystals property. The commission said that if they cannot strike a deal with the top applicant, they would proceed further down the rankings.

Both camps packed the meeting to speak out for and against the Crystals site, whose selection some viewed as a foregone conclusion.

"This is a charade," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation.

The Sierra club trotted out their miniature horse and cart outside the building to make the point that the port commission was "putting the cart before the horse" in its decision-making. Posters placed around the room by a group called the Cities of the Glades Tri-Cities Coalition urged the selection of the Crystals site.

"If there's anything we can do for the constituents that we were elected to serve, we should bring the inland port to Palm Beach County," said County Commissioner Priscilla Taylor.

"We believe that Everglades restoration will provide for more jobs in the near term than an inland port," said environmental activist Drew Martin.

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Inland port vote pointless

12/17/2009

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Palm Beach Post

Port of Palm Beach commissioners gather again today to consider where to build an inland port, a decision of statewide importance that they are ill-prepared to make. The best decision would be no decision. In fact, the commission should hand off its authority to a regional panel with representatives of the state and all three South Florida ports.

The port is seeking 3,500 acres for a rail hub/distribution center that promises thousands of jobs. Finalists are offering sites in Palm Beach, Hendry and St. Lucie counties. Port commissioners put off a decision in October, to see the bidders' business and marketing plans. But they didn't give finalists enough time or data to produce those plans. Backers of the Hilliard Bros.-U.S. Sugar-Hendry County team, didn't even submit a plan, writing that "all parties (they talked with) question the ability to create a truly meaningful business and marketing plan over a 30-day period."

Instead, the port's request seems geared toward getting bidders to answer one question: What's in it for the Port of Palm Beach? Aside from coming up with the idea and giving their chosen site a false air of credibility, the port adds little to the equation. An inland port depends on unknowns: participation of South Florida's dominant ports in Miami and Fort Lauderdale, the ability of South Florida to attract cargo through an expanded Panama Canal and the construction of a freight rail line from Hialeah near Miami to South Bay.

Among the factors that argue for a regional decision-making body:

- * The Port of Miami and Port Everglades have made no commitments. In fact, Port Everglades Director Phillip Allen wrote last month, "We find the current proposers ... to be inadequate" and "We do not yet believe the options under consideration to date are viable."
- * The state has begged port commissioners to delay their decision, raising issues about money for road and rail improvements and potential environmental damage. Without state support, the project is doomed.
- * The feasibility study that the port uses to justify the project made no clear pronouncement that an inland port is feasible and listed issues that would take years to resolve.
- * The port promises thousands of jobs when the Panama Canal is expanded in 2014, but there's no guarantee that South Florida ports can compete for that cargo.

Glades residents are pressuring the commissioners because unemployment rates in that area are 40 percent, and the purchase of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration will take more jobs. Any inland port, however, would not produce large numbers of jobs for years, no matter where it goes. And it would produce no jobs in the Glades if built 40 miles away in St. Lucie County, despite the offer of a shuttle bus. Glades residents prefer the Florida Crystals site in Palm Beach County but it would clash with Everglades restoration options, assuring years of legal delays.

The best site is the Hilliard proposal near Clewiston, which has no environmental issues and would produce jobs in the area hardest hit by U.S. Sugar's shrinkage. But as long as the Port of Palm Beach acts as the decider, the site doesn't matter.

Palm Beach County lands inland port, despite environmental concerns

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12/17/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

8:11 p.m. EST, December 17, 2009

Environmental warnings failed to stop Palm Beach County port officials Thursday from deciding to put a sprawling, inland industrial distribution center in an agricultural area targeted for Everglades restoration.

The proposed "inland port," now planned on sugar giant Florida Crystal's land in western Palm Beach County, would become a South Florida distribution hub linked by rail lines and truck routes to coastal ports that could tap into cargo shipped around the world.

The land-locked Port of Palm Beach hopes to grow by working with Broward County's Port Everglades and the Port of Miami to create the inland industrial distribution center.

Where to build the inland port turned into a politically charged decision, pitting job-hungry communities near Lake Okeechobee against each other and drawing threats of legal fights from environmental groups.

Thursday evening, the Port of Palm Beach board chose sugar producer Florida Crystal's proposal to build the facility near the company's Okeelanta power plant west of U.S. 27. Florida Crystals beat out two competing sites near Clewiston and another near Port St. Lucie.

The "desperation" of unemployment in Glades communities, coupled with the increase in cargo shipments expected from the upcoming widening of the Panama Canal makes now the time to act on the inland port, Port of Palm Beach board chairman Edward Oppel said.

Florida Crystals' site was chosen after a "fair and rigorous" process that factored in environmental concerns, Oppel said.

"There is no time to wait," Oppel said.

Palm Beach County officials pushed for their hometown port to pick the Florida Crystals site so it would provide jobs for Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee, where unemployment hovers near 40 percent.

The need for jobs outweighs potential environmental concerns, business and community leaders argued Thursday.

"We need to have economic development. We need to have jobs in the Glades," said state Rep. Mack Bernard, who represents western Palm Beach County.

Environmental groups object to the proposed Florida Crystals site, saying it threatens to get in the way of plans to use agricultural land to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows to the Everglades.

Environmentalists have warned that picking the wrong site could lead to years of legal fights that end up delaying the inland port and the jobs it could bring.

Richard Grosso, of the Everglades Law Center, called for port officials to delay a decision until restoration plans are finalized.

"It just seems as though they have not had a real level-headed look at all this," Grosso said after the port board's decision Thursday. "This is not the final word on the subject at all."

Port officials in October delayed a decision on picking a site after state officials questioned the potential effect on Everglades restoration.

Gov. Charlie Crist is pushing a \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. to use for Everglades restoration. If the deal survives a legal challenge, the sale could go by the summer.

Florida Crystals maintains that its location along U.S. 27 is ideal for the inland port and that the land is outside areas planned for Everglades restoration. Florida Crystals attorney Cliff Hertz said the environmental objections are "misleading and false."

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel or 561-228-5504.

Port of Palm Beach's inland port draws criticism from all sides ahead of key vote

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12/15/2009

Palm Beach Post

Quinlan, Paul

WEST PALM BEACH — Port of Palm Beach efforts to build a warehousing and distribution complex that would serve South Florida's three seaports has come under mounting criticism in recent weeks from a competing port, potential allies and environmentalists.

Fort Lauderdale's Port Everglades, which has outgrown the Port of Miami in shipping container volume, called the four companies who want in on the public-private development deal and their various proposals "inadequate," in a Nov. 24 letter to the state.

Hilliard Brothers of Florida and U.S. Sugar Corp, who together are one of the four bidders, recently suggested in their own letter that the Port of Palm Beach defer to the state's transportation and environmental agencies, who want the project put on hold until further studies are conducted.

And today, the Sierra Club demonstrated in downtown West Palm Beach, hitching a miniature horse to the back of a small wagon to convey that the port is "putting the cart before the horse" — at potential risk to the health of the Everglades.

Other environmental heavyweights, such as the Everglades Foundation, have threatened to sue if the project is sited too close to the Everglades or restoration projects. They want restoration plans drawn up before plans for an inland port.

Despite the push-back, port officials say the commission will vote as scheduled Thursday to select a private partner. Richard Pinsky, the port's lobbyist, dismissed the criticism.

"Everyone's making their voice heard," said Pinsky, who noted that the concept was proposed three years ago and studies are already completed.

The basic plan calls for building a campus of warehouses and distribution centers where goods could be sent from South Florida's three seaports by road or rail for unpacking and reshipment. Port leaders say the project will ensure South Florida captures part of the increase in mega-freighter traffic from Asia that's expected to flow to the eastern U. S. once the Panama Canal is widened in 2014.

Port leaders say that Panama Canal construction will not wait and neither should Florida. They also say an inland port could provide thousands of needed jobs — especially in the Glades area, where unemployment has surpassed 40 percent in some parts.

"The priority should always be with jobs and job creation," said Manny Almira, the port's executive director.

The Port of Palm Beach's inland port campaign has become increasingly quixotic since October, when Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mike Sole and Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos both urged the port to hold off until further study on where such a transport complex might go and whether it is needed.

"It's clear they are rushing things," said the Sierra Club's Jonathan Ullman.

Environmental groups fear the port will choose on Thursday to partner with Florida Crystals, the politically powerful sugar giant owned by the Fanjul Family of Palm Beach.

The Fanjuls are offering land they own south of Lake Okeechobee, which sits beside 73,000 acres the state is purchasing from competitor U.S. Sugar Corp. for future Everglades restoration. Crystals says its site will not interfere with state restoration efforts and that the Crist administration's opposition to the "inland port" is payback for Crystals' ongoing effort to have the court's block Crist's proposed deal with U.S. Sugar.

In its protest today outside the Palm Beach County Governmental Center, Sierra Club representatives called on the port to throw out Florida Crystal's site and hold off on development until restoration plans are drawn.

"They need to make the decision about Everglades restoration before they can make the decision about this massive industrial development," said the Sierra Club's Kay Gates.

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Anthony Westbury: Inland port in western St. Lucie County could mean jobs, jobs, jobs

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12/12/2009

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers

Westbury, Anthony

It'd be big, really big — as in \$1 billion worth of big — if the Treasure Coast is lucky enough to be chosen for an inland port.

By Thursday we'll know if we've beaten out five other South Florida sites for what could be the mother of all engines of economic development.

On Dec. 17 the commission of the Port of Palm Beach will let the world know their choice.

As I've explained before, the inland port doesn't have much to do with water except in an indirect way. Think of it rather as a giant transportation hub where rail and highway links converge.

An inland port would relieve the pressure and congestion at seaports in Miami, Port Everglades and Palm Beach.

And using a site inland supplied by rail could significantly reduce truck traffic on corridors like Interstate 95. The toll on South Florida's highways and ports is expected to increase exponentially after 2015, when a widened Panama Canal opens.

Container ships from China and the Far East that currently use U.S. West Coast ports will be able to directly access Eastern Seaboard markets.

The Treasure Coast's proposed inland port would sit on more than 7,000 acres between Glades Cutoff and Rangeline roads in western St. Lucie County. Visit tcinlandport.com for maps and detailed information.

Three major landowners and a small army of advisors that includes heavy-hitters former Sen. Mel Martinez and former state Sen. Ken Pruitt, are pushing hard for the project.

They argue "our" site is the most logical choice because of its large acreage, ready-made links to rail lines and proximity to the Interstate highway system and large consumer markets.

An added bonus for us would be the creation of a vast industrial/warehousing/assembly commercial area that could eventually create up to 20,000 jobs.

I told you this was big.

As you might expect, politics could get in the way of those impeccable planning principles.

Competing sites near Lake Okeechobee are suffering from high unemployment which could get worse if the state's Big Sugar land deal goes through.

Apparently, Gov. Crist's office has lobbied the port to choose the Glades for the inland project.

Yet, as Treasure Coast boosters argue, an inland port near the lake could jeopardize Everglades restoration efforts. Besides, they say, we could provide commuter services to St. Lucie to offset Glades' unemployment concerns. It's only a 40-minute ride away.

And let's not forget our own economic woes. With 15-percent unemployment, a bloated inventory of foreclosed homes and an eager workforce, surely we qualify for some consideration, too?

Port authorities want to keep us in the dark until Thursday.

Bidders were asked recently for detailed business plans, yet these won't be available to the public until after the final

decision has been made.

For potentially one of the biggest job-generating projects we've ever seen that seems less than democratic.

Why are they hiding behind confidentiality concerns with the paperwork is already in?

All we can do now is wait with fingers crossed.

Even if we aren't the final choice, Treasure Coast project manager Jim Karas said, we could go ahead with our own transportation hub and commercial park regardless.

That'd still mean jobs, jobs, jobs, which is ultimately the name of this game.

Anthony Westbury is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects his opinion. For more on St. Lucie County topics, follow his blog at tcpalm.com/westbury. Contact him at (772) 409-1320 or anthony.westbury@scripps.com.

Tamiami bridge hailed as key restoration step

12/09/2009

Key West Citizen

Silk, Robert

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MIAMI-DADE -- A menagerie of officials hailing from Washington, Tallahassee and South Florida descended upon the Tamiami Trail last Friday for the groundbreaking of a project being called the most significant one yet in the effort to restore the Everglades.

But just 15 miles up the highway sits a reminder of why restoration of the River of Grass has proven such a difficult task.

Dressed smartly in a suit, bolo tie and Everglades ball cap, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar was among those who shoveled the ceremonial first scoops of dirt for the \$81 million, three-year project that officials expect will increase water flow by 92 percent from north of the Tamiami Trail, also called U.S. 41, into Everglades National Park.

The project, featuring the construction of a one-mile bridge just west of the intersection of the Tamiami Trail and Krome Avenue and the reinforcement of another 10 miles of roadway, has been on the drawing board for 20 years.

It is designed to alleviate problems caused by the east-west highway, which acts as a giant dam, keeping northern Glades water out of the Shark River and Taylor sloughs, and thereby disrupting the River of Grass' historic flow from Lake Okeechobee south to the Gulf of Mexico and Florida Bay.

Salazar promised the exuberant audience of approximately 300 at the groundbreaking that more Everglades restoration projects would begin at the "speed of lightning," and stressed the importance that President Barack Obama attaches to the unique ecosystem.

"If we do not succeed here in the Everglades, we will not be able to succeed in restoration efforts all across America," Salazar said.

Despite the excitement of the moment, government officials and environmental advocates alike say that more will have to be done along Tamiami Trail if Everglades National Park is to be genuinely rehydrated.

Plans approved in 2005 had called for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build a second bridge, running for two miles, on the west end of the project area. Skyrocketing cost estimates caused the plan to be scrapped. But last year Congress directed the Department of the Interior to evaluate the need for additional bridges and report back in March.

In an interview last week, Everglades National Park Superintendent Dan Kimball said the evaluation would be complete by February. Along with the environment, it will take into account myriad stakeholders along the eastern Tamiami Trail, including Native American camps and airboat operations.

"We've got to get the most bridging we can and recognize the commercial interests," Kimball said.

It's not just conflicts between public and private, however, which have made the oft-delayed Everglades restoration process so difficult to implement.

Since well before the onset of the \$20 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan in 2000, South Florida ecosystem projects have been slowed by battles between various branches of governments; between governments and industry -- notably Florida's sugar industry; between government and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians; and between the competing needs of South Florida's urban, rural and wild areas.

Exemplifying those problems is the current debate over how Miami-Dade County should make use of the Everglades Jetport property, located along the Tamiami Trail just a handful of miles west of the road project zone and within the boundaries of the Big Cypress National Preserve.

In the late 1960s, Dade officials had targeted the area as the site for a regional international airport, but the plan was defeated by a coalition of environmentalists, hunters and federal officials and prompted the creation of the Big Cypress National Preserve in 1974.

Since then the one airstrip that was built on the 37-square-mile site has functioned as a pilot training facility for various government agencies. But most of the land has been left alone -- managed under contract by the Big Cypress Preserve.

In early November, however, with Miami-Dade's Aviation Department buried beneath more than half a billion dollars of debt brought on by renovations at Miami International Airport, administrators recommended putting the property to use for oil and gas exploration. Officials projected that such exploration, which would take place in a region with known oil reserves, could yield \$140 million in revenues over a 20-year period.

Officials also put forth alternative uses for the tract, including rock mining, establishing it as a park for off-road vehicle trails, selling the land for restoration to developers who damage habitat elsewhere, or selling it outright. But oil and gas drilling was their top choice.

For now, the proposal is on hold. Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez pulled the item from the county commission agenda last month, saying he opposed further drilling in the preserve.

But Miami-Dade Aviation does not consider it dead, media relations manager Mark Henderson told the Free Press last week.

"All of the options are still there, including the oil," he said.

Kimball said issues like the financial one afflicting Miami-Dade Aviation are just part of the complicated overlap that characterizes Everglades management.

"We have a very complex natural ecosystem and we have a very complex institutional ecosystem," he said. "... We are trying to do everything we can to restore the place, but we also know there are agencies facing financial problems. I think at the end of the day everybody realizes the priority is to restore the Glades."

Indeed, surrounded by the euphoria of the groundbreaking ceremony last week, the jetport and the many other complications that are part of Everglades restoration didn't register as a blip on the mind of Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole.

"I tell my staff that if we point our arrows in the same direction we can accomplish anything," he told the crowd. "Today I really get the feeling that we have our arrows pointed in the same direction."

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