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Water managers delay decision on extending Everglades land deal

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Mounting financial concerns could pose renewed hurdles to Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed \$536 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

The South Florida Water Management District will wait until next month to decide whether to extend the deadline on the contract to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar. The delay allows the Florida Supreme Court to rule on a pending legal challenge to the land deal.

In March, the district board also will be discussing the implications of a difficult budget situation, which could imperil the costly land deal. Property tax revenue has declined because of drops in home values.

The district board still can back out of the land deal if it is expected to become too much of a strain on providing core services such as flood control and protecting the water supply.

District Attorney Sheryl Wood said waiting until the board's mid-March meeting still gives the district plenty of time to take action before the March 31 contract deadline.

The district faces, in addition to a tight budget, the expense of responding to newly proposed federal water pollution standards. It could cost billions of dollars to address those standards.

"I'm not panicking," said District Board Member Shannon Estenoz, a vocal supporter of the U.S. Sugar deal. "Do we still need the land? Oh, yeah. ... Buying land is more important now than ever."

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BLOG: Collins expected to exit South Florida water board

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The South Florida Water Management District next month is expected to lose an outspoken, long-time leader.

Michael Collins has served on the district's appointed board for 11 years and his latest four-year term expires in March.

First appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush in 1999, Collins helped reshape the agency that oversees South Florida's water supply, guards against flooding and leads Everglades restoration.

But Collins has become the board's most vocal critic of Gov. Charlie Crist's proposal for the district to spend \$536 million to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration.

That makes it unlikely Crist would re-appoint Collins to the nine-member district board that could still back out of the still-pending land buy.

Board members are appointed by the governor and ratified by the state Senate. Crist so far has not kept any of Bush's former appointees.

The governor is still reviewing applications for Collins' at-large seat on the district board, said Chris Cate, Crist's deputy press secretary.

Collins, a Keys fishing guide who lives in Islamorada, has been an advocate for protecting Florida Bay but during his tenure he also often found himself at odds with environmental groups. Collins has become a supporter for agriculture's water rights and has been critical of groups that file lawsuits over environmental issues. He has argued that the U.S. Sugar deal, hailed by many environmental groups, would prove too costly and take money away from other planned Everglades restoration projects.

At the district board's monthly meetings on Wednesday and Thursday, agency officials heaped praise on Collins for his 11 years of service.

Bush sent a letter crediting Collins for helping further "Florida's steady progress" toward restoring the Everglades.

During Collins' tenure, the district acquired 230,000 acres for Everglades restoration and built more than 30,000 acres of stormwater treatment areas to clean up water headed to the Everglades.

Board Chairman Eric Buermann called Collins a "tremendous public servant."

Whether serving on the board or not, Collins is expected to continue to be an outspoken advocate for Everglades restoration, fellow Board Member Shannon Estenoz said.

"It's naive for us to believe that Mike Collins is going to start playing golf and fishing every day," said Estenoz, whose term also expires in March.

Collins during his years was known to dominate board discussions, but on Thursday he was a man of few words. Collins said there was "a lot of joy" and "a lot of frustration" during his years on the board.

"I've said it all," Collins said. "It's been an honor and a privilege."

