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Bennett sour on sugar deal

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Latest evidence that lawmakers are targeting Gov. Charlie Crist's \$1.34 billion plan to buy U.S. Sugar in order to restore the Everglades comes in this op-ed piece from Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton. He has previously pushed for voter approval in South Florida for the deal. Here's the entire letter:

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In an environment of reduced spending, the U.S. Sugar deal is being touted by Governor Crist as a sweet deal for Florida. Under "normal" circumstances, I would whole-heartedly agree with the Governor although I have been incorrectly quoted as labeling the sugar deal as a bad idea. I support environmental preservation and protection of our water supply. As a Floridian for over 50 years, I would love to see the Everglades returned to its original habitat and ensure clean water for future generations. But, I am also committed to the constituents I am elected to serve and the state interests I am elected to defend. I believe, in the current economic slump, we simply cannot afford this purchase.

A basic principle of sound finance -- that most every citizen understands -- is, "Don't buy something you can't afford." In an economic downturn, where Florida is struggling to stay afloat and maintain a balanced budget, basic principles are more important than ever. Legislators are saddled with cutting funds for many good and important programs and projects. There is nothing sweet about this difficult process.

Perhaps I could be more supportive if the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) would provide important answers to certain questions like: 1) how much of the land they actually need, 2) how will the land be used, and 3) how do they plan to finance the necessary construction following the purchase. But they have not provided these answers. It seems that SFWMD would like the legislature to rubber-stamp the plan while they sign away over a billion dollars in taxpayer money to a project that has more questions than answers.

Merely acquiring the land is not sufficient to benefit the Everglades, and yet SFWMD is moving forward with the mindset of buy now, plan later. The sense of urgency surrounding this deal concerns me. Too many times mistakes are made when projects are green-lighted and do not receive due process. Considering the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) role in overseeing this purchase, wouldn't it make sense for them to perform an appraisal? Yet, they haven't. Why are we buying 180,000 acres when all we need is somewhere less than 100,000 acres? During her appearance before the Senate Committee on Community Affairs, Carole Wehle, SFWMD's Executive Director, said that the thinking of SFWMD is to buy everything they can now, and then sell what they don't need later. However, SFWMD has not provided the names of any potential buyers for those unnecessary acres.

Undoubtedly, this deal would put the Everglades on the fast track to restoration -- but where does that leave the state? What about the 16 surrounding counties that will be strapped with a debt - \$3 billion with interest -- over the next 30 years? Then there's the human cost of taking land out of sugar production: The possible loss of 10,711 farm-related jobs, according to a recent study by the University of Florida. As property tax collections decline and the Governor purposes even more property tax cuts, how will SFWMD pay the mortgage? Additionally, SFWMD will actually have to stop other restoration projects already in progress in order to afford this purchase. And to complete the restoration, SFWMD would still need to spend about \$5 billion in engineering and construction costs, to acquire more land north of Lake Okeechobee.

In my opinion, this deal simply does not pass the smell test. I believe we must be prudent during this tough financial period as we work to restore our state's financial strength. The fact that the land is available does not make this purchase a sweet deal. Good times or bad, basic and sound financial principles should always apply.

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