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Land buy worthy

Will we ever restore the Everglades?

Last summer when Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar Corp. unveiled the state purchase of 187,000 acres to help reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, hopes soared that maybe, just maybe, the long-delayed restoration project would move forward.

Wide swaths of land south of the lake would become a series of reservoirs and pollution-filtering wetlands that would help restore the River of Grass and the Everglades, starved of water from the dams and ditches built in the name of flood control.

Once replenished, the Everglades would recharge the aquifer that quenches the thirst of South Florida.

The Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers would be spared the pollution from Lake Okeechobee. The pollution in the two river estuaries has damaged the fishing and tourism industries on both coasts.

But is the cost too high — especially today during a deep recession?

Initially put at \$1.75 billion, the price tag now stands at \$1.34 billion, the midpoint between two appraisals and lower than another one a few years ago.

The South Florida Water Management District will foot the bill from the property tax it already collects in the district's 16 counties.

State Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, believes the tract is overpriced and the state does not need all the land. Bennett, who owns property in Clewiston, U.S. Sugar's home base, filed a bill in the Legislature that would require a purchase to go before voters.

His position is outlined in the guest column below.

We believe that his point on the price is short-sighted. The price will only increase as the economy rebounds.

Plus, once the state owns the entire parcel, valuable agricultural pieces outside the River of Grass could be sold off to such potential buyers as Florida Crystal, a U.S. Sugar competitor with considerable holdings in the region.

In addition, U.S. Sugar is only interested in selling the entire tract and would not reduce the acreage.

The company would lease the entire tract back for seven years, returning some \$100 million back to the water district. That time frame will allow the state to come up with an economic plan for the region to help offset the loss of agriculture jobs. Certainly, the water district anticipates providing hundreds of jobs on the dozens of public works projects for decades.

The region could also expect an increase in boating, fishing and tourism once the Everglades begin blossoming with water and life again.

Is Bennett's bill subterfuge to submarine this purchase? His populist position — no taxation without representation — is questionable. The governor engineered this deal in the best interests of the state, and he remains solidly behind it.

The water district points out that it would be difficult if not impossible to hold water district elections since it follows hydrologic boundaries, not county or voting ones.

This week a judge in West Palm Beach is hearing arguments about whether water district should be allowed to issue bonds for the purchase. That could be a deal killer.

Of greater impact, though, is the steep plunge in property values — expected to fall 14 percent in the water district.

But, as noted, Crist and the district hope to sell off some property, including U.S. Sugar's new state-of-the-art mill.

Outside of the state budget, this issue ranks as the next biggest in the Legislature — not only with Bennett's questionable bill but a companion one in the House. The debate should be over the merits of this purchase and the costs, not pushing this off on an all-but-impossible election.

Everglades restoration has been delayed for far too long. There will never be the perfect time. Costs will only escalate, the reason for all the past postponements.

It's time to move forward.

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