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Big deal threatens small towns

By [Joel Engelhardt](#)

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The endangered towns on Lake Okeechobee find themselves in the uncomfortable position of seeking aid and comfort from the enemy. The enemy in these parts is the state, which is insisting on buying 180,000 acres of fertile farmland to convert into who knows what.

To Clewiston and Belle Glade and South Bay and Pahokee and other tiny places dotting the lake, the plan to buy U.S. Sugar to save the Everglades, means just one thing: their death knell.



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Since Gov. Crist announced the now-\$1.34 billion deal on June 24, business in Clewiston, the town U.S. Sugar built, has faltered. People aren't fixing up their homes anymore so the paint store and the plumber can't make money. Residents can't flee because they can't sell their houses - who's going to buy a house in a dying town? - so the real estate agents aren't making money. It's gotten so bad that business is down even at the local McDonald's.

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But these residents won't give up. They made so much noise that they rattled the South Florida Water Management District board, which voted 4-3 for the buyout in December but which must vote again before the buyout is completed in September.

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The people who love their way of life want to know how Gov. Crist will keep his big deal from killing their small towns. They want a plan. They want action. They figure the moment the land deal closes, no one will care what they want anymore.

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and tours this week. The first thing he told 15 business leaders at a meeting Tuesday in Clewiston is that he's no Superman. But he is representing the governor. And the governor told him, just the night before, "You've got to move the needle."

What they got was Dale Brill. Dr. Brill holds a doctorate in marketing and is Gov. Crist's economic development officer. He came down for three days of meetings

Dr. Brill worked mostly to put this tough crowd at ease. "I am on the hook" with the governor, he said. He

knows how hard it can be, he said, having grown up in Lockport, Ill., as steel mills and oil refineries closed.

He tried to be real. He'll help them negotiate the maze of bureaucracy. He'll be their bridge to Tallahassee, where, at the governor's direction, he is now included in weekly meetings with the secretaries of Transportation, Community Affairs and Environmental Protection.

He called them the Three Amigos. Add Dr. Brill and call them the Four Musketeers or the Four Horsemen. Doesn't matter. It'll take a lot more than a nickname to satisfy this crowd.

Dr. Brill says he can do it. "I'm in government not because I wanted to be a bureaucrat," he said. "The reason I'm in it is to be able to look back and say 'I made a difference.' "

Dr. Brill got here by way of Visit Florida, the state's public-private tourism agency. He's been a marketing professor at Florida State University and, for three years, wrestled with General Motors Corp. over the company's shift to e-commerce.

He talked specifics. He promised to help find money to close a troubled deal to bring a City Mattress plant to Clewiston's empty industrial park. He promised to find ways to widen 22 miles of State Road 80. And he pledged to deliver the plan that everyone wants. "You've got my personal commitment," Dr. Brill said, "to give you a sense the ball is rolling somewhere."

Not exactly Knute Rockne, but not wild-eyed either. Dr. Brill is new to Clewiston but he has grasped one sure thing. The people of this city founded in the 1920s, before U.S. Sugar came in 1931, are not ready to give up when U.S. Sugar leaves in 2016. He knows enough to know that wild-eyed promises won't work. Not here. Not now.

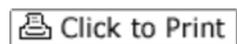
"I have my marching orders (from the governor) to give you that plan," he told the business leaders, "and if that commitment isn't there, then I'm the fool."

His enemies - former enemies, perhaps - pray he isn't.

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