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Crist gives Glades empty feeling

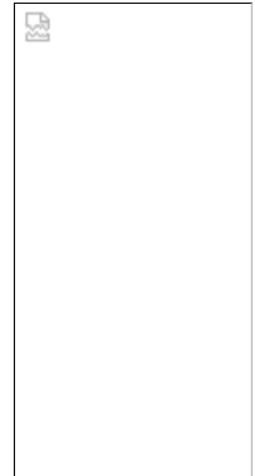
By [Randy Schultz](#)

Palm Beach Post Editor of the Editorial Page

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In recent days, Gov. Crist has filled an opening on the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region. He's filled two slots on the Miami River Commission Policy Committee. He's chosen five people for the Children's Services Commission of Martin County.

After nearly eight months, however, Gov. Crist still hasn't filled a seat on the South Florida Water Management District board.



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It's true that the governor requires a separate staff to screen applicants for the thousands of such appointments. Obviously, the governor wants to make sure that he picks the best people. But meaning no disrespect to all those other organizations, that water district board seat is not just another appointment. And not filling it is just one more sign to a group of Floridians that they don't matter.

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One member had to recuse himself. If the Glades seat had been filled, the vote might have been 4-4, and the deal would have died.

The South Florida Water Management District includes 16 counties. The nine board members represent all areas of the district and are supposed to represent all of the major interest groups: utilities, farmers, environmental groups. In June, the board member from the Glades resigned because he is a vice president of Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar. The district had announced the deal that began as a \$1.75 billion purchase of the company itself and now is a \$1.34 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres for Everglades restoration.

It really annoyed the Lake Okeechobee farm towns that Gov. Crist didn't fill the seat by December. That month, the board approved the sale, which many Glades residents believe will suck the life out of their communities. The vote was 4-3.

If you sense that the Glades folk believe that the failure to fill the seat was deliberate, you're right. A group of Clewiston residents vented to *The Post* just before the vote.

Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness was in that group. She and some of the others were in Tallahassee last week

for a Senate committee hearing on the sugar deal. Since June, Glades leaders have tried to find out what the state has in mind to replace the jobs - U.S. Sugar has 1,700 employees; Clewiston has about 7,000 people - that will be lost to the sale. On Wednesday, Mayor Chamness sounded wearier and more resigned than ever. "They wanted to hear our concerns," she said of the senators. "I know the speech pretty well by now."

Mayor Chamness also is feeling more used than ever. Two weeks ago, lakeside mayors got phone calls asking them to be part of the governor's visit to the Port of Palm Beach. Mayor Chamness expected a big announcement about the proposed inland port, a cargo distribution/warehouse center that could create lots of jobs in the Glades. Instead, the mayors were part of the backdrop. For that she drove 70 miles from Clewiston?

Then there's that vacancy. "There always, always has been someone from the farm areas," the mayor said. "I know some of the people who have applied. They care about our area and Lake Okeechobee. I don't know why it's taking so long." Gov. Crist says he wants to fill Mary McCarty's seat on the Palm Beach County Commission quickly because "the people in that district deserve representation." McCarty resigned six weeks ago.

In March, the water district board will start dealing with a lot of big issues related to the sale, which is supposed to close in September, and Everglades restoration. To make a statement, the board will hold its March 11-12 meeting in Clewiston, in an auditorium named for a former president of U.S. Sugar. Mayor Chamness says that the town is setting up the John B. Boy Auditorium to ensure trouble-free video streaming of the meeting. Youth groups are preparing to cook hamburgers and make a statement of their own as they welcome the visitors who hold the town's fate in their hands.

And if that one board member's chair still is empty, well, that will be a statement from the governor.

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