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Senator Muddies Everglades

The Tampa Tribune

Bradenton Sen. Mike Bennett has come up with a slippery way to kill Everglades restoration. He's demanding the state's plan to purchase 180,000 acres in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar be put to a vote by affected taxpayers.

He knows that is impossible.

The \$1.35 billion purchase is being conducted by the South Florida Water Management District. It will issue bonds that will be covered by property taxes the district already levies. No tax increase is planned.

There is no procedure for voting in the district, which is drawn according to hydrological, not political, borders. It covers all or parts of 16 counties. There is no state law guiding elections in the district, so Bennett knows his proposal would be the death of the Everglades purchase and restoration.

The district has used the same bonding mechanism to cover much of the Everglades restoration work. So should his plan be adopted, it would eliminate any chances of saving the River of Grass.

There is no question the largest land acquisition in the state's history, which was orchestrated by Gov. Charlie Crist, deserves scrutiny.

Lawmakers are free to do so. They can, if they feel it is a bad deal for taxpayers, kill the plan.

But Bennett's approach appears designed to mask his true intentions. He pretends to be acting on behalf of voters while seeking to kill the acquisition, a goal being vigorously pursued by special interests that also want the land. They've marshaled their lobbyist troops in Tallahassee.

Bennett owns property in Clewiston, a sugar industry stronghold that expects to lose jobs when U.S. Sugar closes shop. The proposed deal will allow the company to lease back the land and operate seven years after the transaction.

Supporters of the acquisition stress the restoration work itself will create thousands of jobs and the ecotourism that will result from a revived Everglades will generate many new businesses and jobs.

The U.S. Sugar property sits between Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park. It will be used to build and hold massive reservoirs that will filter polluted water before it flows on to the Everglades and Florida Bay. Cleaning up the Okeechobee connections is essential to rescuing the Everglades.

The land purchase also will enable the district to halt the flow of polluted agricultural water that is now channeled to estuaries on both coasts.

As with any major transaction, there are risks. Some critics say the state is paying too much.

But other appraisers have said the deal is responsible, particularly since it offers the state the opportunity to buy all the land necessary to ensure the survival of the Everglades and a future healthy water supply for

South Florida.

Nathaniel Reed, the longtime Everglades champion, says, "This land purchase is the single most important investment in Florida's history. Never again will the state have this opportunity to purchase the land necessary to restore the River of Grass and protect the quality of water to South Florida."

Crist has staked his reputation and legacy as governor on the deal.

Without Bennett's interference, the outlook for the Everglades would be brighter than it has been for years.

Washington remains committed to partnering with the state in the restoration work, which will cost about \$10 billion over 20 years. The recently passed stimulus plan provides extra money to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that the state can seek for the restoration.

But Bennett's posturing muddies the natural wonder's prospects. If the Bradenton politician wants to kill the purchase and future restoration, he should have the courage to say so openly in the Legislature. Otherwise he should butt out.