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## EDITORIAL: Money still well spent

Palm Beach Post Editorial

Tuesday, July 21, 2009

It's hard to throw away as much as \$40 million in public money and call it a cost savings. But that's essentially what the South Florida Water Management District is saying about its decision to halt construction in western Palm Beach County of the world's largest above-ground reservoir.

As *The Post* reported on July 12, the district stopped construction of the A1 Reservoir last year at a pivotal point. The district had spent \$272 million preparing the site, particularly by carving out a 22-mile perimeter. The next stage, at a cost of \$330 million, called for building 12-foot-high walls along the perimeter to turn the former sugar cane field into a humongous bathtub.



After a lawsuit challenged the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit the district obtained for the project, district officials stopped work before erecting the walls. If the permit had been ruled invalid, the district would have had to dismantle the walls. So, on behalf of the public, the district swallowed \$2 million a month - the total could be as much as \$40 million - in fees to suspend the contract.

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One month later, Gov. Crist announced plans for the water management district to buy U.S. Sugar. That deal - now just for part of the company's land - was a show-stopper. It changed everything about how the A1 Reservoir, on the former Talisman cane fields, would fit into the new picture of Everglades restoration. Since then, the district has stopped the contract on the A1 Reservoir and shelved the project.

But the completed work is not worthless. It could prove invaluable.

To preserve the Everglades, the district needs to store and clean water. With the U.S. Sugar purchase, the district no longer would need to store water on the Talisman land because it would be more practical to store water farther north, next to Lake Okeechobee. Instead of a reservoir with 12-foot walls, the Talisman lands would be converted more productively into a marsh that would cleanse polluted water before it is released into the Everglades. The construction that has been done could prove useful in creating the marsh.

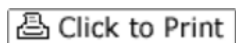
Palm Beach County wasted millions by ignoring lawsuits and starting to build a Scripps Florida campus at

Mecca Farms. The water district came dangerously close to a similar mistake with the A1 Reservoir, but pulled back before reaching the point of no return. There may be reason for the public to be a little frustrated, but there is no reason for the public to be angry.

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