

Subject U.S. Sugar land purchase to a referendum

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The certificate of participation bond hearing to approve the South Florida Water Management District's plan to acquire 72,300 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. is more than just a "procedure." It cuts to the heart of the Florida Constitution as to whether buying land alone constitutes a "project" and can be funded through COPs by taxpayers within the 16 counties of the district. Court approval signifies to the potential bondholders that a public purpose will be served and the certificates are solid.

In *The Post*, district board Chairman Eric Buermann characterized the bond challengers as a small minority of interests. If the district believes that there is widespread sentiment for this purchase, the district should use full-faith-in-credit bonds and hold a districtwide referendum. The board is an unelected body pledging taxpayer dollars for 30 years. Under the terms of the deal, it will be at least 10 years before U.S. Sugar relinquishes its leases and public-purpose projects could be built.

The district has testified in court that it would need a partner - state, local or federal government - to ever build features on the land. The district testified that the citrus acreage was offered as an "all-or-nothing" part of the deal. The district then attempted to justify what features to build on the land, most of which will be used for water-quality projects that do not qualify for federal cost sharing.

Testimony also showed that the cost of constructing water quality and storage features is estimated at between \$14 billion and \$18 billion, far beyond any debt load the district has statutory authority to take on. Contract terms require projects to be funded and approved before takedown of lands. This assures that nothing will be done for the foreseeable future. So where's the public benefit? The district is asking the court to approve an appointed body's vision of restoration with no assurances that it ever will be feasible to implement.

The bond hearing is an important procedure that assures that the taxpayers who are paying all \$2 billion (purchase price plus interest) get something more than empty promises. We are hopeful that the court will see through this unwise undertaking, protect the taxpayers and reject the validation of COPs for the proposed purchase of land for a very questionable benefit.

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Editor's note: George H. Wedgworth is president and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida.