Gov. Charlie Crist’s scaled-down proposal to buy out U.S. Sugar still offers considerable potential to restore the Florida Everglades. Yet it also marks the second time in five months that the governor has surprised the public by changing course on the effort to replumb South Florida’s ecosystem. The new approach raises many of the same questions that clouded the governor’s original proposal in June:

Is the asking price fair to taxpayers? How much land would be available (and when) for restoration projects?

Would U.S. Sugar’s interest in pursuing some sort of development on the property it holds back, including ethanol production, undermine the cleanup? And how would the state work to sustain jobs in the rural Okeechobee basin as it scales back agriculture, the key to restoring the natural water flow from the Everglades into South Florida? The state needs to answer these questions before final approval of this historic land purchase.

Rather than buy out U.S. Sugar entirely, Crist now proposes to buy 181,000 acres of land from the company for $1.34-billion. The change would shave more than 20 percent off the initial $1.75-billion price, but it comes with significant strings attached.

U.S. Sugar would lease the land back and keep farming it for at least seven years. The company would also
retain 6,000 acres, its sugar mill, a railroad and a processing plant, which could be used in a new venture to produce ethanol from sugarcane waste.

The price tag needs another look. The new plan shaves just $400-million off the price, even though the facilities U.S. Sugar would keep are valued at $600-million. Appraisers blamed the use and proximity of the lands involved for the price swings. But those are huge differences, and they warrant more scrutiny. The state would have to wait seven years to reclaim any substantial chunk of land — and that time line could be longer if restoration projects were not in the works. A sugar company lobbyist told the St. Petersburg Times this month it was "highly unlikely" the state would be prepared to use the full acreage in seven years, and thus, "there's every reason to believe there will be some extension of those leases."

The state has been down this road before — buying farmland for restoration only to have the projects put on hold. Crist needs to provide a legitimate time frame for completing these rehabilitation projects. That will require closer cooperation with Washington on the state-federal restoration effort. The South Florida Water Management District, the state agency that would buy the land, needs to assure the public it can finance the purchase without shortchanging other essential projects.

Crist and the water management district also need to explain how they will balance restoring the Everglades with protecting the economy of the rural towns along the rim of Lake Okeechobee. Residents need a concrete idea how the state will help them transition away from the only life many know. Environmentalists have a role to play, too. Though understandably giddy after all these years with the chance to reconnect the lake with the River of Grass, environmentalists should insist that any contract include clear and enforceable commitments.

Grand visions are wonderful, but only detailed plans implement them. The water management district will hold
workshops and public hearings in December. It needs to answer these questions before bringing the proposal to a vote.