Be sweeter to the taxpayers

Palm Beach Post Editorial
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Palm Beach County agreed in September to initiate a land-use change that would help Florida Crystals convert sugar cane fields into a warehouse district, but two developments make Wednesday's vote to formalize the move anything but a formality.

First, county commissioners learned that their decision to allow mining on U.S. Sugar land raised the cost of buying the company's 180,000 acres as much as $300 million. Second, Bob Kanjian, who backed Florida Crystals, has been replaced on the commission by Shelley Vana. The proposal will test her willingness to balance needs of the environment against demands of sugar growers.

Florida Crystals wants to convert at least 3,000 acres for an inland port, an industrial hub linked to South Florida's three seaports by rail. The inland port still is a pipe dream, but Florida Crystals lobbied hard to get consideration of the change that would help Florida Crystals but could cost taxpayers.

Commissioners dismissed environmental concerns in April, when they voted 4-2 to rezone 7,500 U.S. Sugar-owned acres for rock mining. Two months later, the South Florida Water Management District announced a proposal to buy U.S. Sugar's land. Based on the value of that mine and another 5,400-acre mine rezoned in...
2006, appraisers said the approvals added a premium of about $300 million to the U.S. Sugar deal. If commissioners had rejected the rezoning, as Commissioners Karen Marcus and Jess Santamaria suggested, the $1.34 billion buyout would be much less costly.

The water district also needs Florida Crystals land south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration. The proposed inland port site is south of the lake, next to the company's Okeelanta mill. The company argues that its mill isn't going anywhere, and that since the area already is industrial, converting cane fields there makes sense. But allowing Florida Crystals to enlarge its industrial base without determining the effect on restoration would repeat the mistake of prematurely allowing mining on U.S. Sugar land. It could restrict options for restoration and soak taxpayers.

Palm Beach County backed Florida Crystals' proposal in September, again with Commissioners Marcus and Santamaria the only dissenters. On Wednesday, the commission votes on whether to begin studies that would result in public hearings next year to change the land's use. With Commissioner Kanjian gone, Commissioner Vana holds the best hope for a vote that could swing a majority against the deal. Commissioner Jeff Koons, who prides himself on support for environmental protection, says he has received private assurances that the land would not be in the path of restoration. Private assurances mean nothing.

Today, the water district board discusses the U.S. Sugar deal. The debate will offer 300 million reasons why Palm Beach County should not become a repeat offender with Florida Crystals.

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