Find money for sugar deal: Projects may have to wait; taxes may have to rise

By THE PALM BEACH POST

Posted: 8:28 p.m. Friday, March 26, 2010

Buying U.S. Sugar's land is more important to Everglades restoration than lesser projects under way. The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board must scrutinize the agency's budget and determine what to sacrifice to deliver the greater long-term benefit.

Board Chairman Eric Buermann understands this, despite withering criticism from opponents of the deal, particularly U.S. Sugar's rival — Florida Crystals. The critics cited a new list of projects the district could cancel or delay so the budget can absorb the deal's estimated $46 million annual debt service. Making the list, though, doesn't mean that the most popular projects would be cut. The governing board must decide in the next few months where the U.S. Sugar deal ranks.

To critics who argue that the district is spending too much and is too willing to delay other important projects to deliver a "sweetheart deal" to U.S. Sugar, Mr. Buermann has a credible response: "This is a once-in-a-century opportunity," he said in an interview. "U.S. Sugar has been there since the 1930s. They don't let go of that land every day. This is the only land on the planet that will serve our purpose, and our purpose is a long-term public purpose. It's not a commercial purpose."

Mr. Buermann is correct that even if the district is paying more than it should, this deal must rank at the top. It's still unclear, however, if the district can cut enough to make up for falling property values. The district could raise more money with a tax increase. The agency's tax rate is so low that it could rise by one-third, remain under a legislative limit, and still not represent a dramatic increase for taxpayers. But with Gov. Crist running for Senate, the board he appointed — and it's a big improvement over the board of his predecessor, Jeb Bush — has refused to consider a tax rate increase.

Unless that policy changes, the district will have to cut good projects that aren't as important as buying first 73,000 acres and, ultimately, all of U.S. Sugar's land. The $536 million first phase, which includes citrus groves U.S. Sugar insisted on including, is the start of controlling land south of Lake Okeechobee critical to all Everglades restoration projects, even those that might be delayed.

If the deal implodes, Mr. Buermann warned, the first thing the district would look at is enforcing higher standards for farmers to reduce pollution in runoff headed to the Everglades. Consider that a warning to Florida Crystals. Another threat if the deal fails, one Mr. Buermann is not willing to make, would be for the district to seize land — farmed both by U.S. Sugar and Florida Crystals — by eminent domain.

The district still has an out. If it can't find the money to do the deal, it can back out without penalty. As an alternative, the district could seek to buy less land now. But if this opportunity is lost, future, different critics will wonder how this water district board could have let a deal so important slip away.

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