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Kudos to SFWMD for buying U.S. Sugar land

06/12/2009

Palm Beach Post

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Kudos to SFWMD for buying U.S. Sugar land

Very special congratulations to Chairman Eric Buermann and the majority of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board for their recent historic decision to move forward with the acquisition of approximately 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land. They have shown tremendous vision and leadership and their bold action will ensure success for Everglades restoration and meaningful stewardship of the entire South Florida ecosystem.

Our state and nation owe them a deep debt of gratitude. Our Florida Everglades, which is truly a national treasure, finally will be saved from ill-advised land practices and policy decisions of the past.

RAY JUDAH, chairman

Lee County Board of County Commissioners

Fort Myers

South Florida water managers won't increase tax rate despite plummeting revenues

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06/11/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

The South Florida Water Management District will not hike its property tax rate, despite plans to finance the state's priciest-ever conservation land purchase amid a historic plunge in real estate values, leaders said today.

The agency expects revenues to drop some \$340 million this year, in part because property values across the district's 16 counties in South and Central Florida are estimated to plunge 12.3 percent, water managers said in a budget workshop today.

The district is planning a \$1.5 billion budget for the 2010 spending year, which begins Oct. 1. The agency's current tax rate is 62.4 cents for each \$1,000 of taxable value. At that rate, the owner of a \$250,000 home with a \$50,000 homestead exemption would pay \$124.80 to the district.

The discussion came as the district prepares to finance Gov. Charlie Crist's monumental Everglades restoration plan: a \$536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland.

The concept calls for eventually building a chain of reservoirs and filter marshes across the land that could recreate the historic, flowing connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

The land deal alone will saddle the district with \$45.7 million in annual debt payments over the next 30 years, budget director Doug Bergstrom told the district's board today at a meeting in Naples.

Water managers maintained today that the deal with U.S. Sugar - downsized twice from Crist's original plan to buy out the company entirely for \$1.75 billion - would not impair the district's ability to perform its core duties of flood control and water supply management.

The one silver lining to this year's dire budget season: Water managers are optimistic that district-wide property values may actually drop less than 12.3 percent, as June estimates tend to be overly conservative, said Bergstrom. 'I'm pretty sure we're going to have some more money to work with,' Bergstrom said. The board will meet in July to review the proposed budget before holding two public hearings in September. The district also must submit the budget to Crist, who has the power to veto it.

Crist will leave behind big unfinished agenda

06/11/2009

Orlando Sentinel

Aaron Deslatte

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Tallahassee

Charlie Crist was inaugurated governor in 2007 pledging to lower property taxes and insurance rates and proclaiming Florida's "best days are not behind us, but before us."

With a broad ambition to transform Republican politics, he launched an aggressive agenda to cut property taxes and insurance premiums, reduce Florida's greenhouse emissions and enact a host of other reforms.

He enjoyed some early success, thanks to his effervescent personal touch, a compliant Legislature and the fading embers of the state's once white-hot economy.

But Crist's decision to skip a second term and run for the U.S. Senate in 2010 means much of that agenda won't be finished on his watch.

Critics and supporters alike say that Crist's signature issues have fallen victim to economic pressures, GOP intransigence or his administration's own lack of follow-through.

"He came in with great challenges, and he's leaving lots of things undone," said state Sen. Dan Gelber, D- Miami Beach, a candidate for attorney general who has worked closely with Crist.

"Because of his choices, it's hard to define what kind of a governor he's been because he's left so much hanging."

Brian Ballard, a top Crist fundraiser and lobbyist, takes issue with that. "It's going to be easy to say 'Charlie's leaving in a tough time.' But we've been through a tough time already," he said.

"I don't think he is walking away from a tough fight. I think he feels he's done what he can here and is ready for a new challenge."

Crist has justified his move by arguing that Florida's economic problems stem from national trends he can better address in Washington. Privately, advisers say, he is frustrated by his inability to enact more of his policies as state revenues collapse.

"At different times over the last three or four months, he would say 'You know, our hands are tied,'" said George LeMieux, his former chief of staff. "I think that's frustrating to him, and he thinks he can do more in Washington."

Still, Crist will leave a lot incomplete or undone. Consider:

?Crist stitched together Cover Florida to provide bare-bones (and low-cost) health insurance for the state's estimated 3.8 million uninsured. But after a year, it has enrolled just 2,434 people.

? Civil rights groups praised Crist in 2007 when he returned the right to vote to hundreds of thousands of non-violent convicts, calling it "the right thing to do."

But tens of thousands of ex-felons haven't been notified of their rights because of budget cuts – and many more convicted of violent crimes still can't vote. "The effort is incomplete, at best," said Mark Schlakman, of the Center for the Advancement of Human Rights at Florida State University.

? The governor wooed green groups in 2007 with a pledge to make Florida a leader in capping greenhouse gas emissions from homes, cars and power plants. He kicked it off with a high-profile summit in Miami that drew national media attention.

But legislators this year rejected his bill to impose California-style auto emissions standards and require that utility companies draw 20 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2020.

? Crist and lobbyists for U.S. Sugar Corp. agreed in 2008 to pay \$1.75 billion for the company's 187,000 acres of land, its sugar mill and other assets "lock, stock and barrel" to enable a restoration of the Everglades.

But the economy soured – and legislators complained – so the deal was scaled down to \$536 million for 73,000 acres, with a 10-year option to buy 107,000 more. And without Crist, long-term

prospects are murky.

The governor also shocked environmentalists this year by signing a growth-management bill that guts the requirement that developers build enough road-capacity to handle the extra traffic they create – and, last year, by reversing his position against offshore oil drilling.

Said Linda Young, director of the Florida Clean Water Network. "It's not going to be sad at all to see him go."

No issue will loom larger over Crist's legacy than his handling of property taxes and insurance. So far, results have been mixed.

Property taxes have fallen, but largely for reasons beyond Crist's control. "Taxes are going down because the market is going down, not for any other reason," said Orange County Property Appraiser Bill Donegan.

The plunge in property values has largely masked the impact of Crist's property-tax changes, the largest of which was 2008's Amendment 1 expanding the \$25,000 homestead exemption, among other tweaks to the property tax system.

"Really, it's been swamped by what's happening in the economy," said Amy Baker, coordinator of the Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

Home values have plummeted: the \$132,900 median sales price in Orange and Seminole counties in April was the lowest since January 2003 – down from \$211,000 a year ago, according to the Orlando Regional Realtor Association.

"What we passed was a poll-driven product, and we're paying the consequences for that," said former House Speaker Marco Rubio, a West Miami Republican who pushed for much larger property tax cuts in 2007 and is now running against Crist for Senate.

"You can't just lead by what your pollster says is popular," he added.

Likewise, insurance rates have decreased by a statewide average of 15 percent since lawmakers passed sweeping reforms in 2007. But those reforms also put all Florida insurance buyers on the hook for as much as \$28 billion in the event of another Andrew-sized hurricane.

Florida biggest private carriers, State Farm and Allstate, responded by gradually dropping their home insurance business. Dozens of new, smaller companies were given business breaks to write replacement coverage.

But the industry has managed to convince policymakers that the 2007 reforms only exacerbate the state's insurance problems. This year, lawmakers -- with Crist's blessing – partially repealed the reforms.

Under a bill Crist signed last month, Citizens Property Insurance Corp., now Florida's largest insurer with nearly 1.3 million homeowner policies, can raise rates up to 10 percent a year until it is financially solvent. Private insurers will also be freer to raise rates, as the state backs away from its pledge to cover their losses after massive storms.

"Did we go too far in 2007? Absolutely," said Rep. Bryan Nelson, R- Apopka, an insurance agent who sponsored the bill to scale back the 2007 reforms. "Fortunately for us, we didn't have a storm. Otherwise, we'd of been in bad shape. We got lucky."

Crist inherited Florida' worst recession in three decades.

Since he took office, the unemployment rate has tripled, to 9.6 percent. While foreclosures around the nation slow, the 59,000 foreclosures filed in Florida in May were up 50 percent from a year earlier, according to Realty Trac.

But rather than making any dramatic moves this year, Crist and lawmakers largely did nothing.

"The whole country is dealing with the issue of real estate and what's happening in the market," Crist said. "By and large compared to other states, if you look at our budget, our solvency, our

[credit] rating ... I'm very pleased with where Florida is."

Crist said recently he is "not really" thinking about what he might leave unfinished.

"We're trying to finish everything now," he said.

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No vemos lo que no queremos ver

06/11/2009

Elnuevoherald.com

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El gobernador Charlie Crist durante un recorrido que realizó el 28 de mayo por los Everglades.

By DANIEL SHOER ROTH

Los residentes de la Florida a veces somos miopes para percibir los peligros latentes en el desarrollo urbanístico, a menos que toquen a nuestras puertas.

Hasta que no nos construyen un edificio de 20 pisos frente a la casa, por ejemplo, no pensamos en los cambios de zonificación ni nos organizamos para impedirlos. Mientras que abunde el agua limpia para beber, no nos sensibilizamos en un grado más profundo ante los efectos de la expansión suburbana sobre los Everglades.

En nuestra edición dominical, se publicó una caricatura de Jardim en la que aparecen cuatro edificios sembrados en macetas. El gobernador de la Florida, Charlie Crist, los riega risueño, con la esperanza de que crezcan. Hay una planta marchita apartada en la ventana.

El caricaturista no pudo visualizar mejor el espíritu de una ley de desarrollo urbano firmada entre bastidores por Crist la semana pasada. La ley cementa una vía rápida para que se concreten más proyectos inmobiliarios con menos vigilancia del estado. A mí y a usted nos concierne porque vamos a desperdiciar aún más tiempo atascados en el tráfico. Y ni hablar de las consecuencias tóxicas para el medioambiente, que se degrada cada vez que una zona pantanosa es llenada de concreto.

Crist, autoproclamado como el gobernador del pueblo, nunca me ha despertado entera confianza precisamente por su acentuado populismo. No puedo olvidar el día en que agarró una roca y la dejó caer, como metáfora de la supuesta futura caída de los impuestos. La roca terminó pegándose en la cabeza cuando abrí el sobre que el tasador de propiedades dejó en mi correo. Tampoco me agradaron sus fastuosos viajes por Europa a costa de los contribuyentes. La nueva legislación de urbanismo viene como anillo al dedo a corroborar mi olfato anti-establishment.

Al César lo que es del César. En la esfera medioambiental, Crist iba por el buen camino. Dio luz verde a la compra de extensas tierras de United States Sugar Corporation, la mayor empresa azucarera de la nación, la cual había contaminado tradicionalmente los Everglades, que es nuestro pulmón. Nombró a defensores del medioambiente para cargos directivos de los distritos de administración de agua. Aprobó más fondos para la conservación ecológica.

Pero, de pronto, dio un giro radical en favor de la industria de la construcción. Justo ahora cuando tiene puesta la mirada en Washington para el 2010 y le hace falta donativos para una reñida contienda electoral, probablemente contra el congresista demócrata Kendrick Meek.

En un abrir y cerrar de ojos, Crist echó atrás dos décadas de avance en los reglamentos de la expansión urbanística: los gobiernos municipales no podrán exigir a los urbanizadores que paguen las ampliaciones de las vías necesarias para aliviar la congestión vehicular. Los proyectos más polémicos ya no serán estudiados para medir el impacto en sus vecindarios. Ciertas áreas rurales podrán ser zonificadas con códigos urbanos sin mayor obstáculo.

Quién lo diría, pero pocos días antes de firmar la ley, Crist anduvo de explorador por el Parque Nacional de los Everglades, haciéndole compañía al Secretario del Interior, Ken Salazar, y al senador republicano de la Florida, Bill Nelson.

Se estima que en la Florida hay al menos 374,000 viviendas en distintas etapas de ejecución hipotecaria. Sin embargo, se han concedido permisos para construir 630,000 viviendas y 480 millones de pies cuadrados de espacios no residenciales. Es absurdo que se aliente tanta construcción, con el pretexto de que promueve la economía. Precisamente, la economía estatal está hecha añicos por la expansión suburbana y el crecimiento desmesurado dentro de las ciudades.

Aunque la nueva ley de Crist nos parezca ajena, vamos a sentir su impacto cuando nos suban los impuestos para construir más carreteras o cuando la factura del agua nos ahogue. Ese será uno de sus legados.

Panel offers mixed views on Everglades land buy

06/10/2009

FloridaEnvironments.com

Bruce Ritchie

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EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK -- Representatives of the Everglades Foundation and the Florida Park Service say a revised U.S. Sugar Corp. purchase proposal will help restore the "River of Grass." But an attorney representing the Miccosukee indian tribe says it will further delay restoration projects already under way.

They participated in a panel discussion before visiting journalists last Thursday as part of the Scripps Howard Institute on the Environment at Florida Atlantic University.

The South Florida Water Management District on May 13 approved a revised deal -- subject to financing -- to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$536 million. The purchase was scaled back from the original proposal -- announced a year ago by Gov. Charlie Crist -- to buy 187,000 acres for \$1.34 billion.

The proposed U.S. Sugar purchase allows the use of existing technology to speed up Everglades restoration, said Thomas Van Lent, senior scientist for the Everglades Foundation.

"We can do it better, faster and cheaper than contemplated in the old plan," Van Lent said. "My perspective is, 'What's not to like about that?' It sounds like a very smart approach on the Everglades if you want restoration and want it as soon as possible."

But Nick Aumen, a National Park Service aquatic ecologist, said he had to give a "schizoid" answer to the question of whether he supports the purchase.

He said he has believed that "big change" was needed for restoration to be successful. But he also said the state already has begun cutting back on needed water quality monitoring to divert money towards the purchase.

"I don't think we'll have the stars line up possibly ever -- or at least for decades -- to do something this bold again," Aumen said. "On the other side, I see a real downside in that (deal) because of the cost."

Lehtinen, who as U.S. attorney sued the state in the 1980s over the quality of water flowing into Everglades National Park, said there's no plan for using the U.S. Sugar Corp. land. Meanwhile, the state is delaying or abandoning other needed restoration projects, he said.

"Nothing in this new plan conceivably gets out of the ground in 10 years -- 20 years minimum to get anything out of the ground," Lehtinen said. "And probably never because there is no money for it."

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EDITORIAL Washington dollars flowing to Glades

06/09/2009

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Tampa Tribune

Jun. 9--Say what you will about the federal stimulus plan, but thanks to it Washington finally is keeping its pledge to share the costs of the Everglades restoration project.

Washington and Florida officials agreed in 2000 to partner in the effort to restore the Everglades, where natural water flow had been altered by numerous drainage and flood-control projects.

Reviving, as best as possible, the Everglades' natural flow would not only save the River of Grass but also ensure an adequate supply of drinking water to South Florida municipalities, stop the dumping of polluted water on both the East and West coasts and improve water quality from Florida Bay to the Keys.

Since federal agencies had spearheaded many of the projects that had damaged the Everglades, its participation in the 20-year restoration venture was appropriate.

But while the state began funding work to reroute and clean up water, Washington contributed little. Work fell behind schedule.

A report last year by the National Academy of Sciences found the slow progress was increasing the project's costs, which had grown from an estimated \$8 billion to \$22 billion. And the study concluded if work was not done faster, the Everglades could deteriorate beyond repair.

But now the federal dollars are beginning to flow to the Everglades' rescue.

President Obama committed \$360 million to restoration work this fiscal year. He is pushing to allocate another \$278 million next year.

Recently, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar took a tour of the Everglades and pledged the administration's support.

Salazar, a former Colorado senator, acknowledged the federal government had "not kept its end of the bargain." But he vowed, "'We are committed to it. We will get it done."

The federal money will be used, among other things, to repair Lake Okeechobee's dike and to restore wetlands.

The much-needed federal commitment comes as the South Florida Water Management District completes an agreement to purchase 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land. (The district also has an option to buy another 100,000 acres.)

The acquisition will ensure the state has enough land to build large filtering reservoirs needed to cleanse agricultural runoff that flows into the Everglades.

All this construction work will bolster South Florida's economy while also preserving a natural system that stretches from Central Florida to the Florida Keys and sustains a critical tourism industry.

In this case, at least, we know that federal stimulus dollars are going to a worthy, shovel-ready project, one that will create job opportunities while protecting the hydrological heart of South Florida.

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