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Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
 COMMENTARY Watershed moment for the Everglades	08/30/2009	Palm Beach Post - Online	
It's all about Mr. Crist	08/29/2009	Orlando Sentinel	
Gov. Charlie Crist places a bet on loyalty by appointing George LeMieux	08/29/2009	St. Petersburg Times	Adam Smith
Our views: Crist's alter ego	08/29/2009	Florida Today	
Crist Picks Old Friend For Seat in U. S. Senate	08/28/2009	Ledger - Tallahassee Bureau, The	Follick, Joe
EDITORIAL: Charlie's cardboard cutout	08/28/2009	Palm Beach Post	
Some Republicans criticize Crist's pick for Senate	08/28/2009	Tampa Tribune	WILLIAM MARCH
Crist Picks Old Friend For Seat in U. S. Senate	08/28/2009	Ledger, The	Joe Follick
 EDITORIAL Victory for the Everglades	08/28/2009	Palm Beach Post - Online	
 Judge OKs Florida's Financing Plan for Everglades Restoration Land Purchase	08/28/2009	Environment News Service	
 Florida court OKs sale of some Everglades debt	08/28/2009	KNAU-FM - Online	
 Florida court OKs sale of some Everglades debt	08/28/2009	Forest Grove News-Times - Online	
Florida Judge Validates \$650M of \$2.2B Request for Everglades COPs	08/28/2009	Bond Buyer, The	Sigo, Shelly
 Crist names former top aide LeMieux to fill rest of Martinez's U.S. Senate term	08/28/2009	Palm Beach Post - Online	DARA KAM

COMMENTARY Watershed moment for the Everglades

08/30/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post - Online

For the Florida Everglades, 2009 is the year everything is coming together.

It started in 2008, with Gov. Crist's game-changing proposal to buy U.S. Sugar. Last week, Palm Beach County Circuit Court Judge Donald Hafele ruled that the South Florida Water Management District could issue \$650 million in bonds to buy 73,000 acres. The deal could close by the end of the year.

There's good news in Washington, too. Until now, the water district has been putting far more money into Everglades restoration than its 50-50 partner, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Under the Democratic Congress, money promised in 2000 is beginning to flow.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said on an Everglades tour that if his department restarts a land-buying program, the Everglades will be on the list. When asked how much was needed, water district Chairman Eric Buermann said \$800 million. Mr. Salazar asked, Is that million with an "m" or billion with a "b?" Finally, a federal official who understands that Everglades restoration isn't much in the massive federal budget.

The new brigadier general in the corps' Atlanta regional office, Todd Semonite, knows and likes the new colonel in the Jacksonville office, Al Pantano. Also, Col. Pantano wrote his Army War College thesis this year on Everglades restoration. Overseeing it all is former Everglades restoration program director, Rock Salt, now deputy assistant secretary of the Army.

"There's a change in attitude up there," Mr. Buermann told The Post Editorial Board. "I really think they've got the fire in the belly." Said district Executive Director Carol Wehle, "If we can't do it now, we'll never be able to do it." The state can't waste this opportunity. Saving the Everglades is a game-changer.

It's all about Mr. Crist

08/29/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Orlando Sentinel

George LeMieux will replace Mel Martinez in the U.S. Senate.

George LeWho?

Exactly the point. You probably haven't heard of Mr. LeMieux because he hasn't held elective office, unless you count the time he won the presidency of his Young Republicans club.

Mr. LeMieux has, however, become Gov. Charlie Crist's closest adviser. One of his most trusted friends. His "Maestro," who orchestrated Mr. Crist's run for governor.

And that's what qualifies him to become Florida's next senator.

"We make decisions together," Mr. LeMieux said almost three years ago after Mr. Crist won the governorship. "He's the senior partner and I'm the junior partner." Never doubt that won't still be the case once Mr. LeMieux takes his seat on Capitol Hill. Just last week at the time of his Senate-job interview with Mr. Crist, Mr. LeMieux volunteered that he's "a Charlie Crist Republican," adding that "the Charlie Crist way ... is the way we need to address things in Washington."

What more could Mr. Crist want in someone to keep warm the seat he himself hopes to win outright in the November 2010 election?

But he gets even more than that from Mr. LeMieux. He acted as Mr. Crist's chief of staff during his stint as attorney general and during his first year as governor.

Could any other people Mr. Crist appeared to feign an interest in to succeed Mr. Martinez show the governor such loyalty? Could any assure him that they wouldn't steal the public's attention away from Mr. Crist's run for the Senate seat, as any chief of staff would know not to do? Could any of them guarantee they'd perform their short-term Senate duties in a way that wouldn't make voters think Mr. Crist might not measure up by comparison?

Surely that's part of the calculus that Mr. Crist, who thinks politics before policy, must have weighed in making his choice. Just as politics must have drawn him to "interview" for the job former state Sen. Dan Webster (showing conservatives that, deep down, he's one of them), former U.S. Attorney Roberto Martinez (showing Hispanics that their concerns are his concerns) and state Rep. Jennifer Carroll (showing African-Americans that he won't forget them when he's hundreds of miles away in Washington).

But for Florida's future, policy matters more than politics. What might Floridians get from Sen. LeMieux? He says he believes in "less government, less spending, less taxes, more freedom." And also in "staying with your positions" and "trying to solve problems for the people." Sounds a lot like his senior partner, the governor.

Do those too-simple talking points mean he'll reflexively boot any form of health-care reform, cap-and-trade legislation or economic stimulus because it means more government and possibly more spending? Does "staying with your positions" like Mr. Crist mean he'll first oppose offshore drilling, then support it?

It's also not hard to imagine Mr. LeMieux lending his ear to some interests more than others. An attorney, Mr. LeMieux's firm represents U.S. Sugar and Florida Power & Light, among other corporate clients. We hope he'll show better sense than extending them carte blanche.

And better judgment than when he steered Mr. Crist to select Jeff Kottkamp for lieutenant governor.

Floridians can thank Mr. Martinez for this state of affairs. For no good reason he quit on them.

And they can thank Mr. Crist, who in his choice of Mr. LeMieux again placed his interests above theirs.

Their interests could possibly be better represented in the future if Florida held special elections to fill Senate vacancies. It's something the state should consider in light of Mr. LeMieux's star turn.

Gov. Charlie Crist places a bet on loyalty by appointing George LeMieux

[Return to Top](#)

08/29/2009

St. Petersburg Times

Adam Smith

Charlie Crist missed his calling as a riverboat gambler.

Our governor stunned everybody last year with his risky, last-minute endorsement of John McCain for the Republican presidential nomination. Now, he has gone with his gut again and tapped his best friend and former campaign manager to fill the term of outgoing Sen. Mel Martinez, shocking much of Florida's political world in the process.

"I'm practically speechless," longtime Republican strategist J.M. "Mac" Stipanovich said after hearing George LeMieux beat out eight other finalists to be appointed Florida's next U.S. senator. "George LeMieux is a great guy and very capable.

"But you've got a list that has a former U.S. attorney (Roberto Martinez) who was the go-to guy of three governors; you've got the mayor of a major city, a chancellor and university president (John Delaney); you've got a guy who won repeated statewide elections (Jim Smith); you've got a guy who served decades in Congress (Mike Bilirakis and Clay Shaw). And you pick George?"

In terms of looking out for Crist's political interests in Washington for the next 16 months, nobody was a safer pick than LeMieux. Crist's former chief of staff — a self-described "Charlie Crist Republican" — would never buck the governor's wishes and has a deep grasp of Florida issues.

But the appointment immediately fueled widespread grumbling among conservative activists and party regulars raising questions about potential LeMieux conflicts of interest and probably giving a boost to Marco Rubio, who is challenging Crist for the 2010 U.S. Senate Republican nomination.

"The base is going to be very concerned. There is no question this will help Marco Rubio," said Pasco County Republican state committee member Bill Bunting. "He took a good, personal friend and said, 'You can hold this seat,'

when you needed someone there with legislative experience."

Crist is trouncing former state House Speaker Rubio in polls and money-raising, and the LeMieux selection suggests Crist is unworried about his challenger or the growing number of local Republican parties holding informal votes that back Rubio. This was not a pick to win over the conservative base.

"For mysterious reasons in the last couple years he seems to have vacated his loyalty to his base, and certainly there's a lot of fence-mending that needs to be accomplished," said Lee County Republican chairman Gary Lee, doubting that LeMieux's selection would help mend fences.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, seen as a long-shot potential endorser of Rubio, kept mum on LeMieux's appointment Friday. One has to wonder what he thinks about the political operative, who in 2006 urged Crist to snub a joint appearance with President George W. Bush, suddenly being anointed U.S. senator.

It's not like LeMieux will be totally out of his league in the Senate. He is a bright, hardworking student of policy, and he understands bare-knuckled politics as well as anyone. His allies waged tough, stealth campaigns spreading doubts about most of the other names on Crist's short list.

"From the standpoint of looking for someone who can do a lot in a year and a half, he's a guy who's going to know everything before he gets there," said Everglades Foundation CEO Kirk Fordham, a former senior congressional staffer.

Since leaving the governor's office, LeMieux became chairman of a law firm that holds a lucrative contract with the state Department of Transportation and that represents U.S. Sugar in a massive and controversial land deal with Florida.

"I know his soul," Crist said Friday.

For his sake, Crist better hope he has a full grasp on LeMieux's financial relationships, too.

LeMieux is not a registered lobbyist, but he has long faced whispers that he is an unregistered influence-trader because of his relationship with the governor. Critics have also questioned his work in negotiating the Seminole Tribe of Florida gambling agreement on Crist's behalf, first as Crist's chief of staff and more recently as a pro bono private attorney.

While the Seminole Tribe was donating tens of thousands of dollars to the state GOP, the party was paying LeMieux's consulting firm tens of thousands of dollars. At the same time LeMieux helped negotiate a deal that skeptics said was too generous to the Seminole Tribe.

LeMieux must file a financial disclosure return in 30 days that may shed more light on how lucrative his ties to Crist have been.

Ultimately, every name Crist was considering had a down side, politically or practically, and LeMieux at least offered unquestioned loyalty and political smarts.

Friday tends to be the day public officials release news they want to quickly fade away into the weekend. Charlie Crist has long shown terrific political instincts, but we won't know for a while whether Crist's smarter gut call was to appoint LeMieux or to announce it on a Friday.

Adam Smith can be reached at asmith@sptimes.com.

Our views: Crist's alter ego

08/29/2009

Florida Today

[Return to Top](#)

When GOP Sen. Mel Martinez announced he was resigning from office, political insiders knew what Gov. Charlie Crist wanted to do:

Advertisement

Appoint himself to the post he's running for next year.

But that would have been too crass, so Crist did the next best thing Friday:

He named his former campaign manager, chief of staff and best buddy George LeMieux to the job in a display of cronyism that put his own political ambition ahead of the best interests of Florida residents.

LeMieux will arrive in the Senate as it debates issues with huge implications for our nation and state, with health care reform topping the list. But he's never held elected office, is not versed on the issues and knows nothing about Capitol Hill.

There is, however, one area where he's an expert:

Displaying absolute loyalty to Crist to the point of being his alter ego. Someone whose every Senate move will likely be orchestrated with Crist for the benefit of his own 2010 Senate campaign.

LeMieux earned the title of "the maestro" for running Crist's victorious gubernatorial effort in 2006. Here's how he described their long relationship to the St. Petersburg Times after the win:

"He's been the senior partner and I've been the junior partner. We make decisions together."

So much for the experienced, beholding-to-no one senator Crist should have appointed to fill out the final 16 months of Martinez's term.

LeMieux left his chief of staff job in 2007 and became chairman of Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart, one of the state's largest law firms in Tallahassee.

There, he has been key in gaining lobbying and government-relations business to add to the firm's portfolio that includes some of the state's richest interests, such as AT&T, FPL, TECO Energy, U.S. Sugar and Franklin Templeton.

LeMieux also has remained Crist's confidante on some of the governor's major initiatives.

That includes helping broker the proposed \$536 million deal with U.S. Sugar for the huge — and highly controversial — Everglades land purchase. Currently, he's negotiating a gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe, another Crist priority that would bring millions in revenue to the state.

LeMieux also runs his own consulting firm, MTC Strategies, which has earned \$150,000 in the past 13 months for consulting to the Republican Party of Florida.

LeMieux said Friday he's resigned immediately from the law firm and will focus on health care and budget deficit reduction when Congress returns to work after Labor Day.

So he may, but we have little doubt he'll be getting his marching orders from the governor's mansion.

For in LeMieux, Floridians have gotten Crist's shadow to keep the seat warm for him.

Crist Picks Old Friend For Seat in U.S. Senate

08/28/2009

Ledger - Tallahassee Bureau, The

Follick, Joe

[Return to Top](#)

By Joe Follick
Ledger Tallahassee Bureau

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TALLAHASSEE | Ignoring a slew of candidates with more experience, Gov. Charlie Crist stunned the political world Friday by naming his closest ally and friend - former chief of staff George LeMieux - to a vacancy in the U.S. Senate.

LeMieux, a 40-year-old father of three, has never held elected office and lost a 1998 race for the state House. But he crafted Crist's agenda as his chief of staff after earning the nickname "the maestro" for leading a nearly flawless 2006 gubernatorial campaign.

Sen. Mel Martinez, R- Orlando, created the vacancy by saying he would resign earlier this month. Crist interviewed at least 10 people for the position, including former congressmen, current and former state lawmakers and others with longer political resumes.

But Crist made it clear Friday that personal feelings overrode political considerations.

"I'm happy for my friend and I'm extremely happy for my state," Crist said. "I know his soul and I know he will serve the people of this state honorably."

With Republicans in the minority and LeMieux's impact likely to be extremely limited in a body that reveres experience, political machinations became the major story line.

Crist and LeMieux could not cite any major differences in their political philosophy Friday, citing only the governor's favoring of the Tampa Bay Bucs versus LeMieux's support of the Miami Dolphins.

Crist's decision cements his unique role in the middle ground of politics, pulling off the unusual trick of simultaneously angering and pleasing both Democrats and Republicans.

Crist's rival in the 2010 Republican primary for the U.S. Senate seat, former House Speaker Marco Rubio, R-West Miami, called the decision "disappointing."

"George LeMieux is a talented political operative and the governor's best friend, but that doesn't make him the right choice to represent Florida in the Senate," Rubio said.

Rubio supporter Dennis Baxley, a former House lawmaker from Ocala and former head of the Christian Coalition of Florida, said Crist has clearly written off social conservatives by ignoring a candidate more to their liking.

"I actually thought he'd make a better decision than that for his own political well-being," said Baxley. "I think it may be a sign that he doesn't think he needs the conservatives to win. I think that's a mistake. I think he did Marco a big favor."

The likely Democratic candidate for Senate next year, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Miami, said Crist treated the selection "like a mockery." "The governor added another addition to his campaign team at taxpayers' expense. George LeMieux doesn't represent Floridians facing economic challenges - he represents privileged clients with expense accounts far removed from the realities Floridians are facing," Meek said.

That echoed the Florida Democratic Party's criticism of the pick as "cronyism," noting LeMieux's work in recent years as a lawyer involved in the state's negotiations on a gambling agreement with the Seminole Indians and the purchase of land in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar.

In a sign of the contortions caused by Crist's political moderation, there was no party unity on the decision. Conservative U.S. Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, said he was "concerned" that LeMieux would "serve as a placeholder for the Governor, rather than serving the people of Florida."

But Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton, who wrote a book last year titled "Fire-Breathing Liberal," said LeMieux "will make an excellent senator."

Groups as varied as the National Rifle Association and the Everglades Foundation applauded LeMieux, as did Republican Party of Florida chairman Jim Greer.

"He's a conservative Republican and a dedicated public servant. I think anyone who doesn't appreciate George's

qualifications doesn't know all the facts," Greer said.

LeMieux enters the Senate well-known in the state's power circle, but virtually anonymous to the public.

Perhaps his biggest moment of celebrity came in the last days of the 2006 gubernatorial campaign when he advised Crist to avoid a public appearance with the increasing unpopular President George W. Bush in Pensacola.

Asked by CNN why Crist dodged the president, Bush advisor Karl Rove snapped that they should ask LeMieux.

In his 1998 state House campaign, LeMieux favored gay adoption and rights for gay partners. His support of a deal with the Seminole Indians to expand gambling further tainted conservatives' taste.

LeMieux joined Crist's staff in the attorney general's office before becoming his campaign manager in 2006.

LeMieux played a key role in virtually all of Crist's initiatives during his first year in office, including a freeze on property insurance rates of state-run Citizens Property Insurance and a deepening of the state's risk in providing back-up insurance for other companies.

LeMieux also crafted the gambling expansion deal and helped Crist push a property tax cut that voters approved in January 2007.

After leaving his post as chief of staff in December 2007, LeMieux became chairman of the law firm Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart in a new Tallahassee office. The firm was paid nearly \$2.8 million in the last fiscal year by the state for legal work.

A Broward County native, LeMieux fondly and repeatedly dubs the area "God's country." He began his political career as head of the Young Republicans Club in 1995, where he first met Crist.

LeMieux spoke briefly Friday, offering concerns about the ballooning national debt and the health care battle. But the most important thing he said may have been a critical factor in Crist's desire to appoint someone who would not challenge him next year.

"My time in Washington will be brief," LeMieux said.

EDITORIAL: Charlie's cardboard cutout

08/28/2009

Palm Beach Post

Palm Beach Post Editorial

Friday, August 28, 2009

[Return to Top](#)

The honest thing would have been for Gov. Crist to appoint himself to Mel Martinez's former Senate seat. The governor's choice of his stunt double should fool no one.

Gov. Crist made a show of interviewing possible replacements, all chosen carefully, based on which voting bloc they represented. But it was all a show. When the moment came Friday morning, the governor picked George LeMieux, his closest political adviser for the past decade. Mr. LeMieux was chief of staff to then-Attorney General Crist and served as chief of staff during the first year of Gov. Crist's term. Though Mr. LeMieux has returned to the private practice of law, he and the governor reportedly speak several times a day.

With this choice, the governor showed that what matters most is that nothing disrupt his plan to flee Tallahassee - and the hard decisions that would lie ahead in a second term - for a Senate seat that he can use to promote himself while he decides whether to run for president. The governor has attempted to cover his retreat by saying that he wants to bring Florida-style solutions to Washington, but that's no more believable than the idea that anyone but Mr. LeMieux was in contention.

Clearly, Gov. Crist couldn't risk the possibility of a supposed placeholder developing a following or wanting to break the pledge of not running in 2010. Mr. LeMieux poses no such risk to the governor. What it means for the state is more problematic.

Though Mr. LeMieux will serve only through next year, key legislation could come before the Senate. President Obama and Democratic leaders still promise a vote on health care reform. Gov. Crist used the word "cockamamie" to describe the health care negotiations, but this state has more at stake than most because Florida has the highest percentage of residents over 65. Will Mr. LeMieux vote based on what is best for the state, or will the governor tell him to be obstructionist and play to the president's critics who favor ex-Florida House Speaker Marco Rubio in the Republican primary? There also could be votes on opening up more of the state's Gulf Coast to oil and gas drilling, and on climate change.

Then there's the issue of Gunster, the Fort Lauderdale-based firm where Mr. LeMieux is chairman. The Gunster tie was a problem in the deal to buy U.S. Sugar's land; Gunster represents U.S. Sugar, the governor pushed the deal and the terms favored the company. How will Mr. LeMieux vote on the farm bill, which includes the loan program that creates a price support for sugar?

With Florida at its most fragile since World War II, it is infuriating to have a governor who so clearly places his future above the state's. His mind is in Washington, and his body should have followed.

Some Republicans criticize Crist's pick for Senate

08/28/2009

Tampa Tribune

WILLIAM MARCH

[Return to Top](#)

Gov. Charlie Crist's decision to name former aide and political strategist George LeMieux to fill the seat of retiring U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez was immediately controversial Friday.

Some Republicans, along with Democrats and Crist's opponent in the U.S. Senate primary, said Crist had chosen a candidate for personal loyalty rather than Washington experience or ability to do the job.

But others said LeMieux, a Tallahassee lawyer, will be a capable placeholder. They noted that that Crist, frontrunner to win the seat next year, had simply chosen a candidate likely to enact Crist's own political philosophy.

It's clear that among the nine candidates Crist considered, he chose the one most personally loyal to him, rather than seeking to please the conservative base of his own Republican Party, some of whom are dissatisfied with his moderate issue stances.

Ties to Crist

Nearly all of LeMieux's political and government career has been tied to Crist -- as Crist's chief of staff in the state attorney general's office, in the same position in the governor's office, and as manager of Crist's campaign for governor in 2006.

He has described himself as "a Charlie Crist Republican."

In announcing the appointment Friday, Crist said, "I am very happy for my friend, and I am extremely happy for my state, because I know that George LeMieux will serve as a United States Senator in a way that will make all of us proud."

LeMieux said he would strive to be "a problem solver" in the Senate and will stick to the principle of limited government "like this great governor."

Asked about LeMieux's credentials compared to the other candidates, Crist said, "I wouldn't describe it in terms of competition like that. I would describe it in terms of the great public service that he's given to the people of Florida, how well I know him, and know his desire to serve the people."

Reaction mixed

Some Tampa Bay area Republican Party leaders from the conservative side of the party expressed their displeasure bluntly.

"Obviously what the governor did is what's in the governor's best interest ... but I think it's about as far away from his

Republican base as he could be," said Debbie Cox-Roush, chairman of the Hillsborough party.

"I believe we had candidates that would have served Florida better in Washington. That's about as diplomatic as I can be."

Cox-Roush and other leaders of the party organizations in Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties had backed former U.S. Rep. Mike Bilirakis of Palm Harbor for the appointment.

Rubio, who's appealing to conservatives in his challenge to Crist in the GOP Senate primary, called the appointment "disappointing."

"George is a talented political operative and the governor's best friend, but that doesn't make him the right choice to represent Florida in the Senate," he said.

But Crist backer and party activist Ho Brown of Tampa said LeMieux "will do OK. He's knowledgeable about the bureaucratic process, he's a sharp guy. He'll make the moderate conservative decisions."

And at least one Democrat – U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler, a long-time friend of Crist – praised the choice, calling LeMieux "a man of great integrity and intelligence" who "clearly has the background and knowledge to represent Florida well," and "will make an excellent Senator."

University of South Florida political scientist Darryl Paulson, a Crist backer, said he would have preferred a candidate with Washington experience, but that Crist was in a difficult situation.

LeMieux "will be the 100th senator, with little power except as a caretaker," Paulson said. "It may put Florida at something of a disadvantage."

But, he said, "Mel Martinez put the governor in a terrible position of trying to find somebody to fill a 15-month vacancy in the position for which he himself is running," he said. "Any governor would want someone whose political ideas mirror his own."

At least two candidates widely respected in the party turned down the job – former U.S. Sen. Connie Mack, Crist's political mentor, and U.S. Rep. C.W. Bill Young of Palm Harbor.

Florida's other U.S. senator, Democrat Bill Nelson, said in a statement, "I intend to have a good personal and bipartisan relationship with the new senator, as I have had with Mel Martinez."

Democratic Party leaders panned the pick.

State party Chair Karen Thurman called it "a glaring example of political cronyism" and said LeMieux "has made millions over the past several years selling access to Crist to the highest bidders among Tallahassee's special interests."

LeMieux's impact

One of Crist's criteria for the job was that the candidate had to promise not to seek re-election to the seat in 2010 – competing against Crist himself. LeMieux is a reliable choice in that regard. "My time in Washington will be brief," he said as Crist made the announcement this morning.

But it also raises a possible scenario that's common in such cases. If Crist wins the seat in the 2010 election, LeMieux could resign early, allowing Crist to take the office early and gain an advantage in seniority over other freshman senators.

LeMieux, 40, a Florida native and long-time Broward County resident who now lives in Tallahassee, is chairman of the Gunster, Yoakley law firm. He's married and has three young sons.

A graduate of Emory University and Georgetown University law school, LeMieux was active in Republican politics in Broward, a Democratic fortress. He lost a state House race in 1998, but became chairman of the county party in 2000.

In 2003, Crist, then state attorney general, made him a deputy attorney general and chief of staff. He first became well-known statewide as the campaign manager considered instrumental in Crist's 2006 winning race for governor.

"Some campaigns have an architect, this campaign had a Maestro," Crist said.

In the primary, Crist fended off a challenge from former Chief Financial Officer Tom Gallagher, who sought support from conservatives in the party.

During the general election, LeMieux famously tangled with Karl Rove, top political consultant for President George Bush, when Crist declined to appear at a campaign rally with Bush in Pensacola just before the election.

Asked whether Crist had made a bad decision by skipping the appearance, Rove scoffed, "Go ask George LeMieux." After Crist won, staffers had the quote printed on T-shirts.

Early in his term as governor, with LeMieux running his office, Crist sought to re-orient the state Republican Party from the conservative approach of the Bush brothers.

While working for Crist, LeMieux was credited with arranging Crist's proposal for the state to buy huge tracts of Everglades land from U.S. Sugar, a deal still in the process of being worked through.

Since leaving, he has represented the governor's office in another major political and business deal, the attempt to reach an agreement on casino gambling with the Seminole Tribe of Florida, which it is hoped will bring the state a large revenue infusion.

Reporter Catherine Dolinski contributed to this report. Reporter William March can be reached at (813) 259-7761.

Crist Picks Old Friend For Seat in U.S. Senate

08/28/2009

Ledger, The

Joe Follick

By Joe Follick

Ledger Tallahassee Bureau

[Return to Top](#)

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Groups as varied as the National Rifle Association and the Everglades Foundation applauded LeMieux, as did Republican Party of Florida chairman Jim Greer.

"He's a conservative Republican and a dedicated public servant. I think anyone who doesn't appreciate George's qualifications doesn't know all the facts," Greer said.

LeMieux enters the Senate well-known in the state's power circle, but virtually anonymous to the public.

Perhaps his biggest moment of celebrity came in the last days of the 2006 gubernatorial campaign when he advised Crist to avoid a public appearance with the increasing unpopular President George W. Bush in Pensacola.

Asked by CNN why Crist dodged the president, Bush advisor Karl Rove snapped that they should ask LeMieux.

In his 1998 state House campaign, LeMieux favored gay adoption and rights for gay partners. His support of a deal with the Seminole Indians to expand gambling further tainted conservatives' taste.

LeMieux joined Crist's staff in the attorney general's office before becoming his campaign manager in 2006.

LeMieux played a key role in virtually all of Crist's initiatives during his first year in office, including a freeze on property insurance rates of state-run Citizens Property Insurance and a deepening of the state's risk in providing back-up insurance for other companies.

LeMieux also crafted the gambling expansion deal and helped Crist push a property tax cut that voters approved in January 2007.

After leaving his post as chief of staff in December 2007, LeMieux became chairman of the law firm Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart in a new Tallahassee office. The firm was paid nearly \$2.8 million in the last fiscal year by the state for legal work.

A Broward County native, LeMieux fondly and repeatedly dubs the area "God's country." He began his political career as head of the Young Republicans Club in 1995, where he first met Crist.

LeMieux spoke briefly Friday, offering concerns about the ballooning national debt and the health care battle. But the most important thing he said may have been a critical factor in Crist's desire to appoint someone who would not challenge him next year.

"My time in Washington will be brief," LeMieux said.

This story appeared in print on page A1

EDITORIAL Victory for the Everglades

08/28/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

[Return to Top](#)

Both sides declared victory after Wednesday's ruling that the South Florida Water Management District can issue bonds to buy a large portion of U.S. Sugar's land.

One side is wrong. It's not the water district.

The district has 10 years to find money for the rest of the land.

Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Donald Hafele's decision is a clear legal victory for the district. The judge found that the district has a public purpose in buying 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar - the step the district is prepared to take immediately - but that the district did not prove a public purpose to buy the rest of the land, which amounts to 107,000 acres.

The Miccosukee Tribe and rival sugar grower Florida Crystals argued that the district is buying the land with no plan or money to do anything with it. Therefore, U.S. Sugar will keep farming the land, and the effect will be to slow ongoing efforts to restore the Everglades. The tribe claimed that it has saved taxpayers \$1.5 billion because the judge limited the district to issuing \$650 million in bonds, not the requested \$2.2 billion.

The district needs the \$650 million by March 10 - or sooner if all legal challenges are over - to close the deal. The district has 10 years to find a way to pay for the remaining 107,000 acres. In a teleconference after the ruling, Executive Director Carol Wehle said the district may rely on land swaps, not borrowed money, to reduce the cost of the rest of the land. Fourteen months ago, the district had planned to buy the entire company. Then the deal was just for all the land. The final compromise was the split purchase, necessitated because of declining tax revenues from the recession.

The last remaining hurdle is the Miccosukee Tribe's promised appeal, which goes directly to the Florida Supreme Court. Judge Hafele, relying on Supreme Court precedent, undermined the tribe's case. "First, defendants' arguments notwithstanding, the court finds that the district does have plans for the use of the 73,000 initially acquired acres," Judge Hafele wrote. "The law is clear that specific, detailed plans are not required in order to find that a valid public purpose exists."

After listing the potential projects, including reducing the amount of polluted Lake Okeechobee water discharged to the St. Lucie River, Ms. Wehle and district board Chairman Eric Buermann proclaimed victory. "When is the last time," Ms. Wehle asked, "any acquisition could deliver that much water resource protection to the citizens of Florida?" And as Ms. Wehle noted, the validation of the public purpose may mean that the district eventually can reach the \$2.2 billion total.

The purchase, championed by Gov. Crist, carries a high price tag, but the price does not outweigh the benefits. The ruling puts the district well on its way to proving to taxpayers that the land purchase is worthwhile.

Judge OKs Florida's Financing Plan for Everglades Restoration Land Purchase

08/28/2009

Environment News Service

[Return to Top](#)

(ENS) - The financing plan for Florida's land deal with U.S. Sugar was approved by a circuit court judge on Wednesday, but only for a portion of the land the state wishes to acquire.

Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Donald Hafele ruled that water managers can use bonds to finance the \$536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of land now planted with sugar cane and citrus orchards that will be used for Everglades water restoration projects.

The South Florida Water Management District, SFWMD, may issue the bonds, called Certificates of Participation, without the approval of the electorate in a bond referendum, Judge Hafele ruled.

The authority granted by the court now allows Florida to move forward with the land acquisition.

Governor Charlie Crist, who has supported the acquisition from the start, applauded the judge's decision, saying, 'Acquiring the 73,000 acres within the Everglades Agricultural Area provides restoration opportunities in the Everglades that once seemed out of reach.' 'As the district moves forward in the acquisition process, I am confident that they will do so in a financially responsible manner,' the governor said. 'The court's decision recognizes the monumental outcome the transaction will have on the restoration of America's Everglades, and the benefits it will provide the environment, the economy and the people of South Florida.' The district has a 10 year option to acquire the remaining 107,500 acres of U.S. Sugar land and had originally sought the court's approval to issue up to \$2.2 billion in bonds, which would have covered the entire purchase.

Under the original deal between the state and the sugar company agreed early in 2008, Florida was to have purchased all of the U.S. Sugar land at once. But the state backed away from that agreement last fall when the recession reduced state revenues. An amended deal agreed on April 1, 2009, set up the two-step process - buy 73,000 acres first and the remaining 107,500 acres later.

The Miccosukee Tribe and unnamed taxpayers had challenged the financing plan, arguing that the water management district's financial plan was economically impossible and that the district does not have the power to issue bonds. The judge rejected these arguments.

Judge Hafele decision turned on the issue of whether the district has a 'valid public purpose' for acquiring the sugar land warranting validation of \$2.2 billion in bonds.

The district argued that the acquisition of approximately 180,000 acres of land for enhanced water treatment and storage serves a valid public purpose.

Opponents argued that the acquisition of land cannot constitute a project with a valid public purpose, especially when the district has no plans for the use and development of that land.

Judge Hafele found that the district has demonstrated a valid public purpose with respect to the initial purchase of 73,000 acres of land, but that the district has failed to show any purpose with respect to the acquisition of the remaining 107,000 acres, that is, the 'option land.' So, the judge capped the bond issue at \$650 million, 'comprised of the \$536 million cost of land and transaction costs (issuance costs and debt reserve).' The judge found that, 'Among the benefits to be achieved with the 73,000 acres are storage and treatment of water before it is pumped into Lake Okeechobee, additional storage and treatment facilities that will work in conjunction with Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Projects basins, and land that will be valuable for future land swaps.' Michael Sole, who heads the state Department of Environmental Protection said, 'The acquisition will be an extraordinary complement to the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, allowing us to improve the supply and quality of water for South Florida, restore a more natural flow of water to the ecosystem, provide flood control and protect the habitats of the ecosystem's wildlife.' SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann said, 'We are gratified to receive court validation of a financing strategy that allows the South Florida Water Management District to move forward with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to purchase these strategic lands to restore the Everglades on a scale never before envisioned.' 'The court's action affirms that the District's financing plan and public purpose of this historic land acquisition are prudent, sound and meet the requirements of Florida law,' Buermann said. 'Future generations will look back on this landmark acquisition as a defining moment for America's Everglades and a lasting commitment to protecting South Florida's environment.' The National Audubon Society and Audubon of Florida intervened in court proceedings in support of the district's efforts to validate the Certificates of Participation. The judge agreed with Audubon's position that the purchase serves a public purpose. Audubon of Florida said today in a statement, 'The River of Grass acquisition can help achieve ecological benefits of Everglades restoration decades earlier than previously planned. The River of Grass purchase is a bold step toward getting the necessary water from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades to Florida Bay, reconnecting the river of grass and truly restoring the Everglades.'

Florida court OKs sale of some Everglades debt

08/28/2009

[Return to Top](#)

KNAU-FM - Online

MIAMI (Reuters) - A Florida judge cleared the way for a state authority to issue \$650 million of debt to finance the purchase of Everglades land now owned by a big sugar company under an effort to preserve the vast wetlands, a government spokesman said on Thursday.

In a written ruling, Palm Beach County Circuit Court Judge Donald Hafale gave the South Florida Water Management District power to sell as much as \$650 million of certificates of participation for the purchase of 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp, America's biggest sugar-cane grower.

Another sugar company, Florida Crystals, and the Miccosukee Tribe oppose the deal championed by Florida Governor Charlie Crist as a major conservation project and had filed suit in state court to block it.

The opponents call the plan a waste of taxpayers' money that will actually slow restoration of the Everglades wetlands, a distinctive ecosystem that is home to 68 endangered species.

Crist, a Republican, and leaders of the district that oversees canals, levees and other water operations in 16 counties, welcomed the ruling as a victory.

But the judge's decision approved only a third of the \$2.2 billion in debt authority sought for Everglades land purchases. Lawyers for the district had not shown a clear public benefit from the planned second round of purchases totaling an additional 110,000 acres, Hafale said in his ruling issued on Wednesday.

An appeal of the ruling was expected, a spokesman for the water district said on Thursday.

(Reporting by Michael Connor; Editing by Leslie Adler)

Florida court OKs sale of some Everglades debt

08/28/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Forest Grove News-Times - Online

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(Reporting by Michael Connor; Editing by Leslie Adler)

Florida Judge Validates \$650M of \$2.2B Request for Everglades COPs

[Return to Top](#)

08/28/2009

Bond Buyer, The
Sigo, Shelly

BRADENTON, Fla. - A Palm Beach County, Fla., judge Wednesday validated \$650 million of the \$2.2 billion of certificates of participation requested by the South Florida Water Management District to purchase land that will help restore the Everglades.

While SFWMD officials hailed the partial validation as a significant win for South Florida's fragile and declining ecosystem, the controversial financing plan still can be appealed within 30 days to the Florida Supreme Court, said Randy Hanna, managing shareholder at Bryant Miller Olive LLP, the district's bond counsel.

The district plans to use COP financing to purchase land owned by U.S. Sugar Corp., whose use of pesticides and other agricultural practices - along with those of other large-scale farmers in the region - has long been considered a major factor contributing to the pollution of the Everglades and the Florida Bay.

SFWMD officials have long said they anticipated the validation to be appealed one way or another. However, the two most vocal opponents of the validation - the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida and Florida Crystals Corp. - have not announced if they will appeal.

Although Wednesday's ruling by Palm Beach County District Judge Donald Hafele represents only a portion of what the SFWMD needs to complete the entire purchase of U.S. Sugar's land, Hanna said the district can seek to validate additional debt in the future.

If no appeal is forthcoming and Hafele's ruling becomes final, SFWMD executive director Carol Wehle said the agency would "mobilize to get the financing done and wrap" up the purchase of land that will allow for restoring fresh-water flows to the Everglades and Florida Bay and stop polluting discharges, such stormwater runoff throughout South Florida.

Validations in Florida usually are low-key and uncontested, but the SFWMD's plan to purchase 180,000 acres for \$1.34 billion from U.S. Sugar drew opposition from the moment it was announced in late 2008 by Gov. Charlie Crist. As the recession took a foothold in Florida, the purchase plan was restructured early this year to enable the district to initially purchase 72,500 acres for \$536 million, with an option to purchase another 107,500 acres within 10 years.

In his ruling, Hafele said he arrived at the \$650 million figure based on the testimony of Thomas Olliff, the district's assistant executive director, who said that \$650 million of COPs would be needed for the initial purchase, which includes issuance costs and a year of debt service payments.

Although it is the intention of the SFWMD to eventually purchase all of U.S. Sugar's land for the same purpose, Hafele contended that the court record was "essentially devoid of any information discussing how the remaining 107,000 acres (if acquired) would be utilized."

"While detailed, specific plans are unnecessary, this is not to say that the district may seek bond validation with ideas so nebulous that the court cannot determine their legality," Hafele said in justifying his reduction of the amount validated. Some attorneys expressed surprise at the partial validation amount, which is rare in Florida.

Crist applauded the court's ruling, saying: "As the district moves forward in the acquisition process, I am confident that they will do so in a financially responsible manner. The court's decision recognizes the monumental outcome the transaction will have on the restoration of America's Everglades and the benefits it will provide the environment, the economy, and the people of South Florida."

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Crist names former top aide LeMieux to fill rest of Martinez's U.S. Senate term

[Return to Top](#)

08/28/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

DARA KAM

TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Charlie Crist on Friday named one of his closest political allies, former chief of staff George LeMieux, to replace U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez - bypassing former congressmen and a former state Cabinet member in favor of someone who has never held public office.

"I know his soul," Crist said at a hastily scheduled announcement Friday morning in Tallahassee, with LeMieux and his family by his side.

"I congratulate George LeMieux for being appointed by the governor to fill the remainder of my term. George is bright, capable, and an accomplished administrator. My staff and I stand ready to ensure a smooth transition."

- U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla.

"This is a disappointing pick for Florida. George LeMieux is a talented political operative and the governor's best friend, but that doesn't make him the right choice to represent Florida in the Senate."

- Former state House Speaker Marco Rubio, who is running against Gov. Charlie Crist in the 2010 Republican primary for the U.S. Senate

"Gov. Crist was afforded a high responsibility with this appointment. Instead, he treated this process like a mockery, politicizing his selection by flying around the state at taxpayers' expense ... and drawing this selection out. Well-respected Floridians with a wealth of elected service experience from Congressman Clay Shaw to Mayor John Delaney to various Hispanic leaders were in a position to hit the ground running if appointed, but that possibility is now nonexistent."

- U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate

"Once again, Charlie Crist has demonstrated his commitment to serving Floridians, by appointing George LeMieux who is well qualified, a dedicated public servant."

- Jim Greer, chairman, Republican Party of Florida

"It's shocking. We wonder why Gov. Crist didn't just appoint himself if he was going to pick his former chief of staff and campaign 'Maestro.' The so-called 'People's Governor' has made clear through this appointment that he places personal loyalty and his own political benefit above the interests of Floridians."

- Mark Ferrulo, executive director, Progress Florida

"I congratulate George LeMieux on his appointment as Florida's U.S. senator. I have known George for a long time, both as a friend and as a former deputy attorney general, a capacity in which he served this office well. I wish him the best in serving the people of Florida in the U.S. Senate."

- Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum, a Republican

"With Florida's economy in shambles, Charlie Crist could have selected a senator who would be able to hit the ground running in Washington to tackle the problems that face Floridians. In appointing a political crony as a placeholder until he can run for Senate himself, Charlie Crist is using the governorship to advance his own political ambitions rather than advancing the lives of the Floridians he was elected to serve."

- Hari Sevugan, spokeswoman, Democratic National Committee

"George is a very, very capable guy and I'm sure he'll do a good job. He's a quick study, he's articulate, he's very close to the governor. I think it's a good choice."

- Former U.S. Rep. Clay Shaw, R-Fort Lauderdale

"George LeMieux is a highly qualified person. I was one who thought he would run for attorney general. He'll certainly be a fine representative ... and of course he has a very good relationship ... with the governor."

- Sid Dinerstein, chairman, Republican Party of Palm Beach County

"Crist is appointing someone from his family. ... This is a placeholder. And I'm sure, unlike Sen. Martinez, he'll actually vote wrong on everything. I'm sure his votes will be there merely to burnish Crist's conservative credentials to improve his position in the primary."

- Mark Alan Siegel, chairman, Palm Beach County Democratic Party

LeMieux, chairman of a prominent Tallahassee law firm and a fellow Republican whom Crist has affectionately dubbed "the Maestro," will effectively serve as a placeholder for Crist. He will fill in for the 16 months remaining in Martinez's term while Crist campaigns for the seat in the 2010 election.

Friday evening, at an appearance with Crist in Fort Lauderdale, LeMieux said "I'm not going to run for the seat."

The new senator also offered words that may come as welcome tidings for the conservative GOP activists who have long distrusted Crist: "I'm pro-life, I'm pro-gun and I'm pro-family," LeMieux said to cheers.

Democrats immediately denounced the appointment as cronyism, and state Democratic Chairwoman Karen Thurman described LeMieux as "someone who has made millions over the past several years selling access to Crist to the highest bidders."

But Crist said all the candidates he interviewed for the slot have "integrity ... and so is the case with my friend George. He is a man of great integrity, of great intellect."

Crist passed over several elder-statesmen Republicans he had asked to apply for the job, including former U.S. Rep. Clay Shaw of Fort Lauderdale and Jim Smith, a lobbyist who served on the Cabinet as attorney general and secretary of state.

Others who did not make the cut include conservative favorite Daniel Webster, a former state House speaker and Senate majority leader. Crist also dashed some people's hopes that Martinez's successor would be Hispanic.

LeMieux served as Crist's right hand when Crist was attorney general and kept his chief of staff position when Crist became governor. In between, LeMieux ran Crist's gubernatorial campaign.

Crist said he made the decision Thursday night after weeks of speculation about who would assume Martinez's post - including Crist himself. Crist had ruled out appointing himself to the Senate seat.

"Charlie promised not to appoint himself to the Senate," said a long-time GOP consultant who was surprised at the decision. "But he just did."

LeMieux played a major role in negotiating one of Crist's biggest deals since moving into the Governor's Mansion - a gambling agreement with the Seminole Indian tribe later thrown out by the Florida Supreme Court.

LeMieux said Friday that he will resign immediately as chairman of the influential law and lobbying firm Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart. Among other matters, the firm has represented U.S. Sugar Corp. in negotiating a \$536 million land deal with the state. LeMieux has said he's had no role in those talks.

He said he will move next week to Washington. Martinez is scheduled to officially step down Sept. 9, the day after Congress reconvenes after the summer break.

LeMieux said his top priorities will be the budget deficit and health care. On the latter, he said he has found "a lot that concerns me" in the version of legislation that House Democrats are proposing.

"We as a country, we as a Republican Party, have to seek out and work for affordable access to health care," LeMieux said. "But I want to do a lot of learning, a lot of listening, a lot of studying on this."

Asked if he would consult the governor on how to vote on major issues, LeMieux said: "I'm sure we'll be talking about a lot of different things."

Peter Brown of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute said he doubts the LeMieux pick will have any impact on next

year's GOP primary or the general election.

"Assuming he doesn't do anything that the voters of Florida are horrified by and therefore blame Crist for ... there's nothing to change the dynamics of the Senate race," he said.

Former House Speaker Marco Rubio, Crist's rival in the GOP Senate primary, blasted the choice.

"This is a disappointing pick for Florida," Rubio said in a statement. "George LeMieux is a talented political operative and the governor's best friend, but that doesn't make him the right choice to represent Florida in the Senate."

Palm Beach County GOP Chairman Sid Dinerstein had immediate praise for the pick.

"George LeMieux is a highly qualified person," Dinerstein said. "I was one who thought he would run for attorney general. He'll certainly be a fine representative."

While not registered as a lobbyist with Gunster Yoakley, LeMieux was the firm's chairman and was seen as instrumental in generating lobbying and government-relations business.

He also has published the online LeMieux Report political newsletter. His clout was evident this year when, after the legislative session, he hosted a wrap-up discussion at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach that drew many local insiders.

This story includes material from the Sun Sentinel.

