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District plans to protect Florida's investment in Everglades Restoration

09/23/2009

Sun Sentinel

Eric Buermann

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A recent Sun Sentinel article focused heavily on the costs associated with halting construction of an Everglades restoration project. However, the article did not fully convey the difficult and bold steps taken by the South Florida Water Management District to protect taxpayer interests.

At 25 square miles, the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir was designed to store enough water from Lake Okeechobee to reduce harmful discharges to Florida's coastal estuaries, improve water quality and help achieve healthy water levels for the lake ecosystem.

Nearly a year after the District began construction, the National Resources Defense Council and others filed a lawsuit challenging the construction permit issued to the District by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Our Governing Board wisely chose to suspend and later terminate construction to protect \$400 million in taxpayer funds that would have been put at risk by moving forward without clarity on the status of the "building permit."

The difficult decision to halt construction closes a chapter on the EAA Reservoir site, but its story as a valuable part of the vision for Everglades restoration is far from over. The public planning process for the River of Grass land acquisition is incorporating the site into projects to benefit the South Florida ecosystem. None of the investment is being lost because work already performed for the reservoir will provide a head start in building those projects.

The District recognizes the significant investment of public funds that has been made in Everglades restoration. We are committed to protecting that investment and South Florida's natural resources through prudent decision making that creates tangible, long-term environmental benefits.

Eric Buermann is Governing Board Chair for the South Florida Water Management District.

Water management district approves budget; keeps tax rate the same

09/22/2009

Sun Sentinel

Reid, Andy

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PALM BEACH COUNTY - The South Florida Water Management District Tuesday approved a \$1.5 billion budget that holds the line on property taxes and includes a half-billion-dollar Everglades land deal.

Residents in most of South Florida, including Broward and Palm Beach counties, will pay a tax rate of about 62 cents per \$1,000 of taxable value to the agency that manages water supplies from Orlando to the Keys.

At that rate, the owner of a home valued at \$230,000, and eligible for a \$50,000 homestead exemption, would pay the district about \$111 in property taxes. That is in addition to property taxes paid for cities, schools and other government agencies.

The budget includes \$536 million the district plans to borrow to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. to store and clean water for the Everglades.

Hurdles ahead for Broward, Palm Beach County water-sharing reservoir

09/22/2009

Sun Sentinel

Reid, Andy

Political fights and environmental worries over a push for a new reservoir could swamp a water-sharing plan for Broward and Palm Beach counties.

A coalition of Broward and Palm Beach County utilities for more than two years pushed for building an additional reservoir west of Royal Palm Beach that could capture stormwater and use it to boost drinking water supplies in the two counties.

Now talk of cooperation switches to dealing with the touchy topics of how to pay for the estimated \$363 million price tag and how to divvy up the water among thirsty communities.

In addition, environmental advocates are raising concerns about how the reservoir plan could affect the water supply needed for Everglades restoration.

Palm Beach County commissioners Tuesday endorsed pressing on with a new million-dollar study to explore the feasibility of the reservoir project -- but not if it commits them to sending water south to Broward.

Instead, Palm Beach County plans to pursue a deal in which Broward County utilities would help pay for the new reservoir and then get "offsets," or credit, from South Florida water managers that allow using more water from the Everglades to boost local supplies.

"It's the part about the water going down south to Broward County that is giving everybody heartburn," Palm Beach County Commissioner Karen Marcus said.

Project supporters maintain that the chance to boost water supplies is worth trying to overcome the political, environmental and financial hurdles. Both counties have formed water resource task forces, made up of elected officials and technical experts, to work out the logistics, said Fort Lauderdale Public Works Director Albert Carbon.

"The overall goal is a regional approach to water management and water supply," Carbon said. "I'm very optimistic."

Dimming that optimism is a rocky history for recent South Florida reservoir projects.

Just this month, the South Florida Water Management District agreed to pay \$12 million to cancel the construction contract on an unfinished reservoir in southwestern Palm Beach County planned for Everglades restoration. South Florida taxpayers already invested almost \$280 million for the reservoir project, now put on pause as water managers pursue a half-million-dollar land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. reshaping Everglades restoration plans.

Draining soggy South Florida to make way for agriculture and development led to a system of levees, pumps and canals that dump stormwater that used to hydrate the Everglades out to sea to avoid flooding.

Instead of building costly new water plants to tap deeper underground water sources, reservoir supporters call for holding onto more of that stormwater and using that to supplement supplies.

The new reservoir would capture stormwater that gets drained out to sea by the C-51 canal that stretches through West Palm Beach. That canal dumps an average of 270 million gallons of water a day out to sea, more than the 232 million gallons per day

utilities in Palm Beach County are permitted to provide.

"The solution isn't new water. We have the water. The solution is storage," Palm Beach County Water Utilities Director Bevin Beaudet said.

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