Water district can't afford to buy U.S. Sugar land

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The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board faces a defining vote at its meeting this week, one that could bring the agency to the fiscal brink and force an increase in property taxes for homeowners in the 16 counties that make up the district.

Two weeks ago, the district's financial adviser gave the agency a dire forecast if it proceeds with the planned purchase of land owned by U.S. Sugar, which, despite what you've heard, would do little to advance the important goal of Everglades restoration. Still, the board appears determined to approve this sweetheart deal, no matter that the purchase would create operating deficits of $89 million and $110 million in each of the next two years.

The board's financial adviser says significant cuts will be needed in the operations and maintenance budgets for current projects essential to the district's mission. To make ends meet, the board will likely have to raise property taxes. No matter the red flags, the district's unelected board is stacked to approve this deal, which was negotiated in secret by big-money special interests in Tallahassee.

Last week, in making two new appointments to the South Florida Water Management District board, Gov. Crist told the St. Petersburg Times that he applied a "litmus test:" assurance that the new members would vote to approve the purchase. Predictably, both new members are on record as supporting the deal.

As I've said from the start, the U.S. Sugar deal represents bad public policy. I was the sponsor of the bill to authorize bond sales for Everglades restoration, as well as legislation that created the Florida Forever land preservation program. But if completed, the U.S. Sugar purchase will swallow the district's budget for years, and prevent progress on other water-supply measures identified as priorities, including the reservoir, pollution-treatment marshes and flood-control protections around Lake Okeechobee.

So, while this project is being sold as Everglades restoration, it would delay actual restoration efforts by using needed money for land acquisition, while U.S. Sugar would retain the more significant tracts in the natural flow-way. Making matters worse, the deal would give U.S. Sugar an exclusive right to lease back the acreage at below-market rates for 20 years.

I'm asking board Chairman Eric Buermann to be forthcoming about the consequences, including tax increases that will be needed and opportunities that will be lost. Continuing to pursue this purchase is not just fiscally irresponsible; it is nothing short of reckless.

SEN. PAULA DOCKERY

Lakeland

Editor's note: Paula Dockery represents Florida Senate District 15. She is a Republican candidate for governor.

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