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Palm Beach County hopes to squeeze new landfill site from sugar deal

01/15/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

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A landfill wasn't part of the state's grandiose Everglades restoration vision in the \$1.34 billion land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

But Palm Beach County now hopes to find a home for a new landfill among some of the 180,000 acres of farmland that don't end up getting used to reconnect Lake Okeechobee's water flows to the Everglades.

County commissioners on Wednesday delayed a decision to pick a site for a new landfill in order to talk to the South Florida Water Management District about a land swap.

The county's Solid Waste Authority would trade its disputed landfill site, beside the northern reaches of the Everglades, for U.S. Sugar land outside the area targeted for restoration. 'They want our property [and] this would allow us to swap with them,' County Commissioner Karen Marcus said. 'It really is an issue of timing.' Timing could be the problem.

The district in December approved the contract for the U.S. Sugar deal and has until this summer to secure its financing to move forward with what would be the largest public land buy in state history. The district plans to sell, lease or swap U.S. Sugar land not used for the system of reservoirs and treatment areas. How much surplus land will be available has yet to be determined.

The Solid Waste Authority has had its new landfill on hold for more than a year as county leaders try to address environmental objections and community concerns.

The plan to open the landfill by 2015 is already behind schedule, Solid Waste Authority Executive Director Mark Hammond said.

The district is willing to sit down with the Solid Waste Authority at any time to discuss the various options, agency spokesman Randy Smith said.

The county has long struggled with where to build a new landfill.

First, residents who worried about a mountain of trash rising near their neighborhoods chased the proposed landfill off 1,600 acres west of Boca Raton.

In 1996, the water district made a land trade that enabled the county to acquire 1,600 acres of farmland miles from the nearest home, but right beside the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

On Wednesday, commissioners were asked to choose land farther north or west of the refuge.

Staffers recommended spending \$68 million for a 1,733-acre property at the northwest intersection of State Road 80 and U.S. 98, five miles west of 20-Mile Bend.

A competing offer from Hundley Farms included about 1,500 acres on County Road 880 for \$54 million. The authority estimates it would be about \$137 million less expensive to acquire, develop and operate than the site to the north.

But the Hundley site drew environmental objections because it is north of a storm water treatment area that cleans water headed to the refuge.

Sugar producer Florida Crystals also offered land at its Okeelanta facility.

Appraisals prepared for the Solid Waste Authority valued the potential sites at \$10,000 to \$11,000 per acre, but the offers ranged from \$34,000 to \$39,000 per acre. Those prices are 'difficult to swallow,' Commissioner Jess Santamaria said.

Palm Beach County delays decision on new landfill site

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Palm Beach County commissioners decided this afternoon to wait 60 days before choosing an alternative site for the county's new landfill.

Commissioners, sitting as the county's Solid Waste Authority board, said they wanted more time to discuss the landfill with residents who might be affected by the project.

The delay would also give the board time to meet with the South Florida Water Management District, which is negotiating the state's \$1.34 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s land. Commissioner Karen Marcus said the authority might be able to swap property it owns near the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge with the district in exchange for property bought as part of the U.S. Sugar deal.

'A little more public outreach won't hurt us,' Marcus said.

Environmental groups have urged the county to scrap its plans to build a new landfill on 1,600 acres it owns next to the wildlife refuge, the northernmost remnant of the Everglades. County commissioners decided in 2007 to pursue alternative locations.

Owners of three large tracts, including the Florida Crystals subsidiary Okeelanta Corp., submitted proposals last year to sell their property to the Solid Waste Authority.

A site selection committee ranked the sites and recommended by a narrow margin that commissioners begin negotiating with the owners of 1,700 acres at the northwest quadrant of the intersection of State Road 80 and State Road 98.

Second on the list is a 1,500-acre tract owned on County Road 880 roughly 4 1/2 miles west of 20-Mile Bend, owned by Hundley Farms and John Lloyd Hundley.

Okeelanta's property came in a distant third. The 1,624-acre site is about five miles south and five miles west of South Bay.

Stimulate Everglades work

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The pitch is simple and direct: Help the economy recover while helping the Everglades recover. Florida's congressional delegation must make that bipartisan pitch to their colleagues.

Pretty soon, the line of pleaders in Washington will be like the line of those wanting favors from Don Corleone on his daughter's wedding day. With talk that an economic stimulus plan could reach \$1 trillion, industries, state and local governments, nonprofit organizations and probably Bernie Madoff's clients want Congress and President-elect Obama to help them through the next year or two at their fellow Americans' expense. Many of these claims will be bogus or undeserved. The argument and money for the Everglades are neither.

In November 2000, Congress became Florida's partner in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Federal participation in what then was a 68-project, \$7.8 billion, 32-year plan to preserve the roughly half of the historic Everglades remaining passed the House 312-2. Under the deal, the state would buy land to store water normally lost to tide, clean the water and then release it to the Everglades on a more natural cycle. The federal government would build the storage and treatment projects on that land. The cost split was to have been 50-50.

Eight years later, only the state has kept its part of the bargain. The South Florida Water Management District, which with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is in charge of the plan, has bought almost 60 percent of the land. In 2004, the water district borrowed \$1.5 billion to build eight projects that were to have been the feds' responsibility. The district wants to spend another \$1.34 billion to buy U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres.

Not until 2007, however, did Congress even pass legislation to authorize the first key Everglades project. The mission now is to get approval of the money, which brings us to the new strategy of trying to include the Everglades work in the economic stimulus plan.

On Wednesday, leading conservation groups held a conference call in support of including money not just for environmental restoration but for national parks and wilderness areas. The list gets as specific as \$10 million to repair Fort Jefferson, built 70 miles west of Key West in the 19th century to protect the Gulf of Mexico and once home to Dr. Samuel Mudd, who set the leg of John Wilkes Booth after he killed Abraham Lincoln.

This week, water district Director Carol Wehle sent a letter to U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston. She pledged at last weekend's Everglades Coalition conference to get the money. Ms. Wehle calculated that \$1.16 billion from Washington could finance 10 projects that would create "more than 900 direct jobs annually, 2,000 jobs over the life of the projects and another 21,000 indirect jobs," according to the Association of General Contractors.

Florida's economy would benefit. Washington would keep its promise on the Everglades. What a concept.

