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OTTED Director Visits Glades County

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OTTED director visits Glades County
By Nena Bolan

Glades County Democrat GLADES COUNTY -- Dale Brill visited Glades County and attended a public meeting at the school district office, Feb. 4. He is the director of the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development (OTTED). Mr. Brill was present to develop a relationship with Glades County people who are concerned about their livelihood. The agricultural region around Lake Okeechobee prepares for the closing of United States Sugar Corporation in six years. "It's the most difficult thing I have ever imagined. We have challenges that are opportunities," said the director. Mr. Brill also mentioned that he grew up in Iowa, known for its corn production, and that he had "pulled tobacco when he was a kid". He believes that agriculture cannot be excluded in the economy. He told his listeners that the change is definitely taking place, and as Governor Crist's appointee, he has been urged to travel anytime to Glades County. Dale Brill pointed out that rural communities had been grossly under represented and historically underfunded. He wants the

com-munities in the FHREDI region to get together and set up a network of cooperation.

The inland port, or distribution center, is a likely concept. While OTTED is not the entity that builds ports, it does work with FDOT, DEP and DCA on research.

Work done on the Panama Canal has doubled its future ca-pacity, according to the director; however, Port of Miami, Port Everglades and Port of Palm Beach are in need of expanding freight transportation. He has toured proposed sites in the Glades re-gion, and mentioned that it may require more than one site to ac-complish the project.

Moore Haven is the county seat in Glades County, and its mayor, Brett Whidden, questioned the wisdom of closing agriculture facilities in the middle of produc-tion. He also reminded the direc-tor of money spent on projects like the reservoir in Palm Beach County that was begun, then shut down; and of channelizing the Kissimmee River, and then having to restore it.

" Take it all into consideration, and then step back and think about it," said Mr. Whidden.

John Ahern, Moore Haven city council member, pointed out that Glades County received an ad-verse, negative experience with the power plant, was devastated by a severe drought and then re-ceived news about water man-agement's buy out of the sugar company.

Tracy Whirls, economic devel-opment director, reminded Dale Brill that Senator J.D. Alexander, Representative Denise Grimsley and Senator Dave Aronberg will work alongside him and Glades County to fi nd out what we need. " We very much need to work as a region," said Ms. Whirls.

Afterwards, Dale Brill attended a dinner hosted by Glades County Economic Development Council that had well over 100 guests. Tracy Whirls can be contacted at 863-946-0300.

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INI/ Nena Bolan

Dale Brill, director of the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development met with local officials, Feb. 4. Mr. Brill is center, Dr. Larry Beasley is left, and Mark Morton is on the right.

Bills would require voter approval for U.S. Sugar deal

02/12/2009

Naples Daily News

MICHAEL PELTIER

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NAPLES TALLAHASSEE Plans to spend \$1.34 billion to purchase 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration should be approved by South Florida voters, a pair of lawmakers insist as they work to slow down a deal between state water managers and the mega-landowner.

Citing the need for more public oversight, Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, has introduced a measure (SB 1436) to require voter approval should any water management district want to levy certificates of participation to make purchases.

The bill comes in response to a proposal that the South Florida Water Management District would use the financial instruments to purchase the property from the sugar producer as part of the states multi-billion Everglades restoration effort. With that kind of money flying around, Bennett said, voters should be more involved. They are appointed, not elected and their authority is way too broad when it comes to spending that kind of money, Bennett said. If the bill is passed, residents in the 16-county South Florida Water Management District, including Lee and Collier counties, would vote on the everglades purchase.

Rep. Denise Grimsley, R-Lake Placid, and chairwoman of the House Government Accountability Act Council is expected to file a companion measure, said Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers.

Williams, too, supports Bennetts efforts, having been at odds with the district over citizen oversight and the ability of the body to tax property owners without seeking voter approval. I think its a good idea to have voters involved, Williams said. In December the water management board on a 4-3 vote approved the purchase of the parcel, a 300 square mile region. The deal is part of a larger plan to store water south of Lake Okeechobee instead of releasing it down the Caloosahatchee River and St. Lucie River.

The releases overwhelm the natural balance of the Caloosahatchee estuary, pushing out marine life, and have been blamed for devastating blooms of toxic algae.

The contract requires the state to lease much of the land back to U.S. Sugar for seven years at \$50 an acre, far below market price. It also requires the district to have financing in place by September.

The deal has come under intense criticism from U.S. Sugars competitors, including Florida Crystals. In December, the company filed a complaint in Palm Beach Circuit Court saying the bonds the water management district plans to use to finance the deal cant legally be tapped for the purchase because it would bail out a private company. In issuing the bonds, the district would be abusing its authority, the complaint says.

Environmental groups, however, are largely on board with the agreement and say Bennetts bill is a deal killer that would render the billions already spent on Everglades restoration far less meaningful. The state already owns huge tracks of land in the region and Draper said the U.S. Sugar purchase is a natural fit. This \$1 billion makes those other investments work, said Eric Draper, deputy director of Audubon Florida. This allows us to get the water from one place to another. The proposal kills the deal without proposing a viable alternative. Williams however, has complained that the asking price is too high, a sentiment echoed by many as Florida sees the price of land plummet following its post-hurricane boom. Shes been clear she doesnt like it around the price issue, Draper said.

Estefan to headline Everglades benefit at The Breakers

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PALM BEACH Grammy winner Gloria Estefan will be the celebrity headliner at The Breakers for Friday's fourth annual fund-raiser for the Everglades Foundation.

The Palm Beach event - with ticket prices ranging from as little as \$500 for individuals to \$100,000 for some table sponsorships - is the first fund-raiser at The Breakers for the not-for-profit group, which is perhaps best known for its role in championing the state's proposed land deal with U. S. Sugar Corp. The group's earlier fund-raisers, at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club, featured entertainment from John Mellencamp, Hall & Oates and Diana Ross. This year's outing also will include honor writer Carl Hiaasen, whose environmentally themed novels include *Striptease* and *Hoot*.

The co-chairs of the benefit include record industry executive Tommy Mottola - the ex-husband of singer Mariah Carey - and his current wife, Thalia.

The event begins at 7 p.m. with cocktails, followed by dinner at 8 p.m.

Everglades Foundation bash brings Estefan to Palm Beach, big money to the cause tonight

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PAUL QUINLAN

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PALM BEACH Nonprofits are taking a bath in today's economy. The Everglades is in near-irreversible decline. Still, the Everglades Foundation will celebrate in high style Friday night. The scrappy foundation is halfway to what would be its greatest victory against its Big Sugar nemesis: helping persuade Gov. Charlie Crist to buy U.S. Sugar Corp.'s farmland. The state intends to supplant the 180,000 acres in the historic heart of the great marsh with a chain of Everglades-sustaining reservoirs and filter marshes. 'It's probably the most significant achievement that we've seen,' said foundation CEO Kirk Fordham. Don't expect the patchouli and drum circles some people associate with eco-activism. The foundation is holding its fourth annual Palm Beach fund-raiser Friday night in The Breakers, after hosting its last three benefits at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club. As of noon today, 618 guests had planned to attend the event, for which tickets started at \$500 and a handful of the most expensive tables have been reserved for \$100,000, Fordham said.

Gloria Estefan will provide the musical entertainment, and the guest list

of celebrities and business magnates includes golfer Jack Nicklaus, Miami Dolphins owner Steve Ross, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson and author Carl Hiaasen.

Also on display is the foundation's success in creating a political and fund-raising force that can spar with the likes of the sugar industry. 'I think it's recognizing the game that you're in and deciding that you're going to play by the same rules that everybody plays by,' said Shannon Estenoz, an Everglades activist who once served on the foundation's board. She stepped down in 2007 when Crist appointed her to the board of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency purchasing the U.S. Sugar land. The foundation's prime mover and chairman is Paul Tudor Jones, the 53-year-old hedge fund manager who ranks No. 334 on Forbes' World Billionaires list. He amassed much of his fortune when he predicted the 1987 stock market crash, returning 125 percent to investors that year.

Jones started the foundation in 1993 with the late developer George Barley, his Islamorada neighbor and fishing companion. Jones later pressed the Everglades' cause while bonding with Crist, whom he had helped elect, during a fishing trip in February 2007.

The foundation experienced a rapid growth spurt in the past five years, hiring a full-time staff of directors and scientists intended to grow its support base and steer governments' environmental decision-making.

It also makes big donations to other green groups. In 2007 it doled out a total of more than \$1.3 million to nine groups, including \$497,950 to Audubon of Florida.

Opponents, including Glades residents who fear the U.S. Sugar deal will wreck their farming economy, deride the foundation as an instrument of Jones' money and influence.

Fordham says Jones no longer provides the majority of the group's money. But his name is alone in the top donor category in the group's annual report: \$250,000 and above. 'He operates like any board member would,' said Fordham. 'He is not driving decision-making within the foundation or in Tallahassee on a daily basis.' The board, which pays all of the foundation's administrative and fund-raising costs, has tightened its belt in light of the economy. That's half the reason for its move to The Breakers from Mar-A-Lago, a venue that cost the gala \$249,000 in 2007. The other reason: extra capacity. 'We actually have a larger crowd this year than we've ever had,' Fordham said. We'd like your thoughts on this story. I appreciate your willingness to share them. At PalmBeachPost.com, we want to avoid comments that are obscene, hateful, racist or otherwise inappropriate. If you post offensive comments, we will delete them as soon as we can. If you see such comments, please . John Bartosek, Editor, The Palm Beach Post. | *HTML not allowed in comments. Your e-mail address is required.

