

SFWMD

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As Week 2 Starts, Legislators to Look At Sugar Deal, Citizens

03/09/2009

St. Petersburg Times - Tallahassee Bureau
Leary, Alex

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Lawmakers return today for the second week of the 60-day session and take on the increasingly contentious plan to buy U.S. Sugar land near the Everglades.

The Joint Legislative Committee on Everglades Oversight will get a 4 p.m. update on Gov. Charlie Crist's plan to buy the land for \$1.34 billion.

Since the last update, there has been a poll released showing that 45 percent of people opposed the purchase and 44 percent supported it but many remained unaware of the purchase. The survey was commissioned by a group fighting the proposal, Concerned Citizens of the Glades Inc.

It was just the latest sign in an intensifying fight over the property. Florida Crystals, another major producer, has been working not so quietly to buy some of the U.S. Sugar assets or even swap land with the state.

Mondays are typically quiet as lawmakers return from their home districts, but the lawmakers in a different joint committee are expected to hear about an audit of Citizens Property Insurance Corp.

The report does not appear to raise any significant concerns.

Tight budget puts Crist's agenda on life support

03/09/2009

Orlando Sentinel
Josh Hafenbrack And Aaron Deslatte

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TALLAHASSEE — Even for the normally effervescent Charlie Crist, hope seems to be in short supply. At least in the Florida Legislature.

Days into a two-month session, many of the governor's top policy proposals are clinging to life support, victims of a tight budget and a shifting political landscape.

In a Legislature firmly controlled by his own party, the Republican governor has struggled to find even modest support for an initiative to cap automobile pollution. His call for fees on water bottlers, and higher driving and vehicle-registration charges and court fees, lack legislative sponsors.

Crist's plan to merge two health-care agencies is foundering. His administration's signature deals — a 2007 Indian gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe and the \$1.3 billion U.S. Sugar buyout to preserve Everglades land — are under fire.

And his \$66.5 billion budget, built on \$4.7 billion in federal stimulus funds, is drawing the ire of Republicans worried about what will happen in three years when the money runs out.

The budget avoids tax hikes and increases school spending by \$183 per student, using the federal infusion and optimistic revenue projections. Lawmakers, meanwhile, are weighing what the governor has warned against: higher taxes on cigarettes and consumer goods and cuts to schools, the state's largest expense.

"We can't write a budget based on hope," said Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Indian River.

Crist calls his budget a "wonderful road map for how we can get to a brighter future" and said he wouldn't push it if he thought the proposals were unrealistic.

His administration "put together a very responsible, very well-thought out, prudent budget for our friends in the House and Senate," the governor said.

"They're the appropriators, and God bless them."

Frustrated lawmakers

But Crist's legislative relations will only get further strained this week.

State economists are expected to announce on Friday that Florida's already out-of-whack budget picture for next year could get much worse, sinking in more than \$5 billion in red ink.

Until they agree on the new size of the deficit, lawmakers won't know how much they can spend during the next 16 months. They're even considering taking the unusual step of asking Crist to submit a budget — which would have to be balanced — using the new numbers.

"Otherwise, we're ships passing in the night," said Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, one of the chamber's budget writers.

Crist, in his third year in office, remains highly popular with the public. His approval ratings top 70 percent despite a dismal economy and an unemployment rate that hit 8.6 percent Friday.

But that popularity doesn't extend to the Legislature — which, in his honeymoon years, Crist regularly cited as in the midst of a "golden era."

The governor ruffled feathers when he vetoed some of the cuts passed in a January special session, including a one-year freeze in \$250 million in conservation-land purchases. Lawmakers were under the impression Crist's office had OK'd the freeze before they approved it.

"There's a little animosity between the governor and the Legislature," said Senate Democratic Leader Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee.

Republican House leaders told Crist's office they won't consider his measure, patterned after California, to cap auto emissions in new cars, which is opposed by the struggling auto industry. The measure is key to bolstering Crist's "green" image.

Legislators also are ignoring his call to quickly approve Crist's \$100 million-a-year blackjack deal with the Seminole Tribe.

Brian Ballard, a lobbyist and close adviser to Crist, said it's too early to say what kind of shape the governor's legislative agenda is in. He said Crist's veto power will make legislators reluctant to cross the governor when his proposals come up for a vote.

"He'll win some, and he'll lose some," Ballard said.

The outcome might be determined by how well the governor plays defense, Ballard said. Crist is intent on protecting the plan (which Ballard helped facilitate as a U.S. Sugar lobbyist) to buy 180,000 acres of sugar fields and restore water flow to the Everglades — a plan on fragile financial footing that legislators are sharply questioning.

On the budget, legislative frustration spilled into public view last week. In testy committee hearings, lawmakers complained that the governor's budget was built on stimulus cash and hope for a quick economic rebound, not fiscal reality.

The governor's budget "sounds a little like the housing problem we got ourselves into: We borrow more than we can pay back. We spend more than we can afford," said Rep. Marlene O'Toole, R-Lady Lake.

Last week, lawmakers also learned property-tax collections for schools are expected to fall \$1.1 billion in 2009, likely dooming the governor's plan to boost classroom spending. Crist's budget was predicated on a \$440 million property-tax shortfall.

O'Toole said that budget, which utilizes \$880 million in federal stimulus money that Florida needs a federal waiver to receive, gives false hope to school districts and may stop them from making necessary cuts and restructuring decisions.

"I'm old enough, I don't believe in the tooth fairy and I don't believe in the Easter bunny," O'Toole said. "I believe in what I have in my hand."

Health-care marriage?

One of Crist's most sweeping proposals would combine the Agency for Health Care Administration and Department of Health, which respectively regulate the \$16 billion Medicaid health-insurance program for the poor and the licensing of doctors, dentists and other health-care professionals.

Few in the Capitol are racing to embrace the concept.

"I've not come across any group that is gung-ho about it," said Florida Medical Association general counsel Jeffery Scott.

Senate Health Care Appropriations Chairman Durell Peaden, a retired physician from Crestview, said the paltry \$2 million in savings expected next year wasn't worth it.

"It would cost more to change the signs," said Peaden. "It's a waste of time."

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Letter from the editor: We're dying?

Not likely!

03/08/2009

Palm Beach Post

J. 'Bart' Bartosek

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By J. 'Bart' Bartosek

Editor, Palm Beach Post

Sunday, March 08, 2009

Thank you all for your comments and responses to my first "Letter From The Editor" (Feb. 8).

I received a few delivery complaints, and I asked our circulation director, Barry Berg, to look into them personally. I got a gripe about a story missing from our Web site, which we fixed immediately. Some readers pointed out headline errors, and we published corrections. I even heard from the father of one of our former sports copy editors, who updated us on his son's work - while airing his own headline complaint!

But the theme I heard from many e-mails was that old "newspapers are dying" refrain. I told each of them, emphatically, "No." This is a large and financially strong company, the biggest group of news gatherers and ad sellers in this area, and we are investing heavily in our - and your - prosperity, as I outlined last month.

I hear from too many people - young, middle-aged and retired - who want to hold a printed edition in their hands at the breakfast table to believe that we'll ever fade away. Although breaking news

has moved online (news that happened in the past 24 hours), the printed paper still has the luxury of offering perspective, context, in-depth reporting and analysis.

A lot of our readers find both sources useful. And we're expanding in digital (Web, mobile and electronic editions) to reach additional consumers as media habits change. In this area, half the adults in the market still get their news every week from The Post or one of its Web sites. That's a higher percentage of adults than in most of the big Florida markets.

Focus on public service

More important, we provide the same valuable public service we always have. I pointed out to my e-mailers more than a dozen investigative stories that have made a difference in the past six months. Among them:

Breaking News reporters Tony Doris and Don Jordan reported in October that federal investigators were probing Palm Beach County Commissioner Mary McCarty's influence on bond deals, three months before she resigned and said she would plead guilty.

Reporter Paul Quinlan reported that appraisers at the Department of Environmental Protection raised sharp questions late last year about the \$1.34 billion price for the state's land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. - and that attorneys for the state quietly deleted the clause in the contract requiring that DEP's staff endorse the appraisals.

Breaking News reporter Andrew Marra's report on the callous slaying of Fresnel Atilus, a popular Lake Park ice cream man, helped raise holiday gifts and money for his family of six children and pregnant wife.

I don't mean to go on - but believe me, I could. These are the stories that strengthen and move our community, and we do them better than anybody. I promise you, that will continue. Please let me know what you think at editor@pbpost.com

Wanted: A few good local writers

Last Sunday, we announced on the Editorial Page that we want "a few good writers." We're looking for informed commentary on local and state issues. And if you disagree with our viewpoints, that's a plus, for us and the community.

Our goal is to expand the chorus of commentary online and in print because the back-and-forth is critical - and sometimes fun - debate for the community. We're glad you read our views, and we know you want to hear others' views, too.

Recognizing that, we make sure that the two columnists on this page Monday through Saturday offer both a liberal and a conservative viewpoint daily. We've also added Charles Krauthammer, a conservative columnist, to the Editorial Page. But those writers tackle national and international issues.

If you're interested in stimulating the debates on local and state issues, please send a bio and samples of your writing to Editor of the Editorial Page Randy Schultz (Schultz@pbpost.com; fax: 561-820-4728). We hope to hear from you.

J. "BART" BARTOSEK

Editor

Florida Farm Bureau seeks support for agriculture as Legislature convenes

03/07/2009

Florida Farm Bureau

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(Tallahassee, Fla.) As the Florida Legislature convenes to focus on budget issues during a period of revenue shortfalls, Florida Farm Bureau Federation will be on guard against unintended consequences that could adversely affect the states second-largest industry. The Federation is the states largest agricultural organization and speaks for family farmers.

Legislators, facing a revenue shortfall of \$5 to \$7 billion, are looking to bolster revenues by increasing fees, eliminating some sales tax exemptions and increasing taxes. At the same time, they realize they will have to decrease state spending.

It adds up to a perilous time for the states agriculture industry.

Our state legislative team is going to have to play some strong defense to ensure our family farmers are not disproportionately impacted, said Florida Farm Bureau President John L. Hoblick. Strong family farms contribute to a strong Florida. That has been demonstrated time and time again, particularly in tough economic times. All Floridians have a stake in keeping Florida agriculture producing and continuing to make a \$100 billion annual economic impact, particularly as other segments of the economy contract.

Hoblick noted the recently released 2007 Census of Agriculture shows an overall increase in the number of farms in the state and the value of agricultural products sold. While other segments of the economy have faltered, agriculture continues to be a strong pillar of the economy.

Ben Parks, Farm Bureaus director of State Legislative Affairs, said the Federation would be joining with commodity organization and allied groups to ward off attacks on agricultures sales tax exemptions and states Greenbelt property tax classification for agricultural operations.

Each one of these sales tax exemptions has been put in place for a reason, Parks said. As the legislature reviews them, we will be reminding lawmakers why they exist and why they are necessary to keep Florida producers competitive in the national and global markets.

Parks said Farm Bureau would also be watching to ensure institutions upon which agriculture depends, such as the University of Florida/IFAS and the Florida Department of Agriculture, do not sustain disproportionate budget cuts.

Florida Farm Bureau also has identified some priorities in the areas of energy and the environment, taxes and fees and local government actions. The organization will continue to support renewable energy and energy efficiency programs that benefit agriculture and the state.

Farm Bureau will seek tax relief at the state level on the purchase of all agricultural inputs. It will also pursue relief at the county level from local business taxes for agricultural operations as well as a clarification of the definition and requirements for non-residential farm buildings. It will also seek to prohibit local governments from imposing tax assessments or fees for stormwater management on agricultural lands with discharge permits or where best management practices are implemented.

Additionally, Farm Bureau will encourage legislation to prohibit local governments from enforcing regulations on agricultural lands which duplicate state, federal or water management district regulations.

Although the proposed purchase of property owned by the U.S. Sugar Corp. by the South Florida Water Management District does not require legislative endorsement, many lawmakers have voiced considerable opposition to the acquisition. Florida Farm Bureau shares their concerns.

Farm Bureau hosts multi-county meeting

03/05/2009

Suwannee Democrat, The
Barbara Gill

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Farm Bureau hosts multi-county meeting

Legislators address areas of critical concern
By Barbara Gill, Reporter

Legislators or their representatives addressed a capacity crowd at Mayo Community Center on Monday night, Feb. 23. The local Farm Bureau office hosted the multi-county legislative meeting.

Rodney Land, Lafayette Farm Bureau president, welcomed guests from Madison, Suwannee, Hamilton, Columbia and Taylor counties.

State Representative Debbie Boyd spoke on the complexity of bills that come before legislators and the difficulty of answering the question, "is it pork?"

State Representative Leonard Bemby told the crowd, "We cannot do without your input. As we control more natural resources that any other part of the state ... this presents many challenges. There are all kinds of things in the budget."

Bemby touched on the state's purchase of US Sugar.

"If you can't pay your bills, then it is not the time to buy land," he said. He noted that 53 percent of Florida is owned by federal, state or local governments. He also raised the question of taxing bottled water and the possibility of higher taxes on cigarettes.

Harold Mikell of Congressman Allen Boyd's office said that at 83 years of age, with 14 years serving at the state level and 16 at the federal level, he is "in opposition to some things." He stated that we are not in a depression because he remembers those times. He repeated Boyd's campaign objectives of a "balanced budget and reducing the debt." Boyd is one of 42 "Blue Dog" Democrats attempting to control spending in Washington.

Boyd voted no on the auto bailout and yes on the revised stimulus bill, convinced that our financial system would be "trashed" if not given help. Boyd also voted for PAGO, pay as you go, for spending bills. Mikell praised the cooperative efforts of producers, government agencies and industry for their successes over the past five years on environmental issues, especially the local dairy industry.

Adele Griffin of Sen. Mel Martinez's office highlighted agricultural components of the stimulus package that will help producers. Martinez voted for the bank bailout but has voted no on all other stimulus bills.

Ben Parks, Florida Farm Bureau lobbyist, urged small acreage farmers to contact their property appraisers if they have been denied green belt exemption. According to Parks, no matter your acreage, you cannot be denied. He agreed with the other speakers that the stimulus bill is huge and confusing and urged everyone to stay in close contact with their state agencies and legislators.

Rod Land thanked our state legislators and representatives from our senator and congressman's offices for their attendance and the opportunity to express our views on current issues affecting agriculture.

Health district picks chief for Glades hospital

03/05/2009

Palm Beach Post

By L.J. Margolis

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By L.J. Margolis

Special to Neighborhood Post

Thursday, March 05, 2009

The Healthcare District of Palm Beach County has named Brian P. Gibbons as the new administrator for Glades General Hospital. The son of an orthopedic surgeon and a registered nurse, Gibbons brings nearly 20 years of professional hospital experience to his new position.

Gibbons will lead the transition to the new Lakeside Medical Center that is scheduled to open this year, and will become its administrator.

Most recently, Gibbons was Chief Operating Officer of the 86-bed acute care Sebastian River Medical Center in Sebastian. From 2003 to 2007, he held executive level positions at Eastern New Mexico Medical Center in Roswell, N.M., and Alta Vista Regional Hospital in Las Vegas, N.M. Earlier, he worked in a variety of administrative positions at Munroe Regional Medical Center in Ocala, Treasure Coast Rehabilitation Hospital in Vero Beach, and Cape Canaveral Hospital. He has overseen several hospital construction projects.

Gibbons grew up in the Cocoa Beach area. He earned his Master of Health Science and Master of Business Administration degrees at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He is Board Certified in Healthcare Management and a Certified Healthcare Executive with the American College of Healthcare Executives.

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Hospital employees raise money: The employees of Glades General Hospital have raised \$30,000 toward the construction of their new medical home, Lakeside Medical Center in Belle Glade. At a weekly fund-raising breakfast, employees donated money by buying the breakfasts and managers donated time in serving the breakfasts.

The gift was presented to Glades Healthcare Foundation, the organization raising money for the hospital campaign, this past Thursday afternoon in the hospital cafeteria.

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Water managers to meet: The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board will meet next week at the John Boy Auditorium in Clewiston. The two day meeting will be held Wednesday beginning at 1 p.m. and Thursday beginning at 9 a.m. The proposed acquisition of U.S. Sugar will be on the agenda. The John Boy Auditorium is at 1200 South WC Owen Ave. in Clewiston.

Clewiston CRA helps beautify: Technical and financial assistance is available for renovations to the exteriors of business buildings within Clewiston's Community Redevelopment Area (CRA). The program aims to encourage business and property owners, through financial incentives, to improve existing business properties.

Policy guides and application forms are available at the Clewiston Chamber of Commerce, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Chamber office is at 109 Central Ave. Call (863) 983-7979 for information.

Archaeologist to discuss Lake O artifacts: During the recent years' drought, which significantly lowered the water level of Lake Okeechobee, Palm Beach County archaeologist Chris Davenport was able to recover many significant artifacts from the floor of Lake O. He will talk about his finds at the upcoming Archaeology Fest, a free event to be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Indian Riverside Park, at 1707 N.E. Indian River Drive between Jensen Beach Boulevard and East Ocean Boulevard in Jensen Beach. For information, call (772) 349-2716.

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Reader writes: Terri Calsetta, Glades General Hospital's Director of Patient Advocacy and Community Health, wrote in response to last week's item about Hendry Medical Center's tobacco cessation program. "We have a free smoking cessation program at Glades General Hospital as well, on Wednesday mornings at 10 a.m. and Wednesday evenings at 5:30 p.m. We also offer free one-on-one sessions. The program includes free nicotine replacement patches."

Beginning May 31, on World No Tobacco Day, Glades General Hospital (and in turn Lakeside Medical Center) will become a "No Tobacco Campus." Tobacco will not be allowed on the premises - including in cars. "It's part of our campaign for a healthier community," writes Calsetta.

Call Glades General Hospital at (561) 996-6571 for information.

Not So Fast on U.S. Sugar Purchase

03/05/2009

Caloosa Belle

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Not so fast on USSC purchase

Hendry County, Fla. – Concerned Citizens of the Glades, Inc. Monday unveiled the re-sults of a statewide poll regard-ing the proposed U.S. Sugar buyout.

The statewide poll, conduct-ed by Mason-Dixon, Polling & Research, Inc. and commis-sioned by Concerned Citizens of the Glades, Inc., found that 60 percent agree with oppo-nents that spending \$1.3 billion is not a top priority now given the state's fi nancial situation, 61 percent feel that waiting would produce a better deal and 64 percent feel the time is not right given the state of the nation's economy. A majority of state voters (62 percent) say they have heard little or nothing about the deal, and when giv-en additional arguments from both sides, opposition to the plan increases.

" This is not surprising, as only 2 percent of Florida voters currently feel protecting the en-vironment should be the high-est priority of state and local government," said Brad Coker, with

Mason-Dixon. "Higher priority is now placed on creating jobs, providing healthcare, improving education and resolving the state's budget deficit."

When given the basic details about the proposed purchase by the state of 180,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar for \$1.3 billion in order to help restore the Everglades, Florida voters are about equally split over the deal. Based on what they currently know, 45 percent state-wide say they are opposed, while 44 percent support it and 11 percent are undecided. After hearing arguments about the deal, both pro and con, a majority of state voters (56 percent) then say they disapprove of it, while approval drops to just 37 percent.

" This explains why proponents are trying to rush this deal, why they are holding secret

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meetings and why they are trying to push for taxpayers to pick up the billion-dollar tab," said Chris Shupe, president of Concerned Citizens of the Glades. " They know that the more taxpayers learn about this 1.3 billion dollar bailout, the more they oppose it."

Concerned Citizens of the Glades sponsored the poll in an effort to stress the importance of considering the will of the people, as opposed to the loud cries of special interests. The coalition has stressed that the deal would be eroding one of Florida's agriculture.

" We've known all along this was bad economic policy, bad fiscal policy, bad environmental policy and bad for the workforce of Florida. But now we know that the people of Florida agree that this is a bad deal," concluded Shupe.

who wish to protect the area's local economy, jobs and future.

The group was spurred to action after the Governor's announcement on June 24, 2008, of the sale of U.S. Sugar to the state for purposes of Everglades Restoration. For more information, visit www.concernedcitizensoft-heglades.com.

LETTER TO EDITOR: Not So Fast on U.S. Sugar Land Purchase

03/05/2009

Clewiston News

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Not so fast on U.S. Sugar land purchase

When given the basic details about the proposed purchase by the state of 180,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar for \$1.3 billion in order to help restore the Ever-glades, Florida voters are about equally split over the deal.

Based on what they currently know, 45 percent statewide say they are opposed, while 44 per-cent support it and 11 percent are undecided.

However, a majority of state voters (62 percent) say they have heard little or nothing about the deal, and when given additional arguments from both sides, op-position to the plan increases.

Statewide, 60 percent agree with opponents that spending this \$1.3 billion is not a top pri-or-ity now given the state's fi nan-cial situation, 61 percent feel that waiting would produce a better deal, and 64 percent feel the time is not right given the state of the nation's economy.

This is not surprising, as only 2 percent of Florida voters currently feel protecting the environment should be the highest priority of state and local government.

Higher priority is now placed on creating jobs, providing health-care, improving education and re-solving the state's budget deficit.

After hearing arguments about the deal, both pro and con, a ma-jority of state voters (56 percent) then say they disapprove of it, while approval drops to just 37 percent.

J. Bradford Coker, Man-aging Director, Mason-Dixon Polling & Research, Inc.

LETTER TO EDITOR: Everglades and U. S. Sugar

03/05/2009

Clewiston News

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Everglades and U.S. Sugar

U.S. Sugar was just as stunned as the public by Governor Crist's bold proposal to acquire our company.

We have farmed this land for nearly 80 years, and we have just invested hundreds of millions of dollars in making our sugar man-ufacturing operations the most ef-ficient in North America.

Our citrus operations already were the best in the world.

However, the Governor was serious in his interest and our board agreed to listen. Twenty years' fractious history of Ever-glades disputes may have prod-ded their interest.

Over the many months of dis-cussions and negotiations, our Company committed to a major shift.

Governor Crist's vision that U.S. Sugar's land could provide a "legacy footprint" for Everglades restoration and revitalize the land-scape of South Florida appealed to our long term interests in this area.

This footprint is a more ap-pealing legacy for so proud and historic a company than farming interspersed with rock mining, development, landfi lls or other activities needed to maximize land value.

Our land will provide opportunities for water storage and treatment that should enable remaining agriculture in the area to be sustainable as well.

While U.S. Sugar moved forward negotiating with the SFW-MD, competitors moved forward with a campaign to discredit the sale. First, they attacked the purchase price.

That attack failed because the \$1.34 billion price was set dead in the middle of the two most recent independent, government real estate appraisals that came in at \$1.37 and \$1.3 billion.

Their first attack failing, they then attacked the 7-year lease-back agreement.

This leaseback allows the state to acquire the land now and still have it remain productive until the state is ready to construct restoration projects. There are three important things wrong with our competitors' attacks on the \$50/ acre leaseback.

Those attacking the lease-back are the same competitor sugar farmers who had similar long-term state leases when the state purchased Talisman Sugar – leases that were \$0/acre for many years.

Florida Crystals still leases tens of thousands of acres of Talisman property today for \$59/acre. Plus, the SFWMD pays them millions more to keep the land free of exotic species.

Our lease requires we pay the lease on gross acres.

Most other agricultural leases, including Florida Crystals' current \$59/acre lease, pay only on net crop acres.

Most importantly, if the state tried to lease all 180,000 acres of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area, there would be no market at all for much of the land.

U.S. Sugar's lease rate takes into account the sheer scale of this deal and the cost of increased Best Management Practices.

The District negotiated a fair deal, including the seven-year lease, which results in nearly \$100 million in lease payments and cost avoidance.

Closer to home, we understand the anxiety toward the future expressed by our employees, growers and communities.

While we don't have a magic wand to make every thing better for every one, we have done several things to ease the situation.

Our current and former employees who are also stockholders will receive an estimated \$365 per share from this sale.

In addition, we have provided a severance of 1-2 year's pay for all employees who lose their job seven years from now as a result of this transaction.

Additionally, U.S. Sugar provided in the sale contract that the District can immediately transfer 3000 acres not under cultivation to local municipalities/governments for economic development. Hundreds of acres could be transferred to local communities immediately upon closing.

We have committed to encouraging the Governor, the legislature and state agencies to quickly develop a real economic transition plan for the local community.

It is also important to keep in mind that the land-only transaction allows U.S. Sugar to retain ownership of the sugar/citrus processing facilities and railroad operations, ensuring they continue operating well into the future.

This secures jobs and economic activity for our communities. Our railroad runs throughout the farming area and can economically deliver cane to the Clewiston mill, making the mill and railroad valuable assets regardless of the land attached.

The District's expert estimated our railroad gives us a 90 percent transportation edge over competitors. Likewise, most citrus processing plants operate independently of grove ownership.

Over 80 percent of the fruit currently processed at our South-ern Gardens plant comes from independent growers, and we ex-pect we could easily contract the remaining 20 percent.

While we have a signed con-tract, this is not completely a done deal.

We made our case for this ac-quisition to our board and soon must apply for stockholder ap-proval.

In the meantime, the law re-quires that we try to obtain better offers for our company.

Many other entities have ex-pressed interest now that we are a willing seller.

Some have said they intend to make a better offer than the state. Should a superior offer emerge, we would accept that offer, provided, however that the South Florida Water Management District would have the right to match that offer.

Finally, the District must also secure funding for the acqui-sition. That said, this acquisition is the biggest and best opportunity that will ever exist to bring 180,000 acres (nearly 300 sq. miles of his-toric Everglades) into public own-ership at one time.

Regardless of what people think of our motives, profi ts or problems, the fact is that many have had that same vision over the years, but Governor Crist is making it happen.

Robert E. Coker, Senior Vice President

U.S. Sugar

Governor faces a dour capitol

03/04/2009

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By Joe Follick
H-T Capital Bureau

Published: Monday, March 9, 2009 at 1:00 a.m.
Last Modified: Wednesday, March 4, 2009 at 9:17 a.m.

TALLAHASSEE - Feeling the burden of historic budget woes, lawmakers began their annual meeting on Tuesday with the specter of overseeing spending cuts that could touch nearly every Floridian.

The potential fallout of three years of plummeting tax revenues includes:

- * The closing of schools and ending of the mandate to limit class sizes.
- * Tuition increases of 15 percent at universities that are accepting fewer students.
- * Taxes or fees on everything from bottled water to cigarettes to driver's licenses.
- * And most precariously, dramatic reductions for health care programs that serve the poorest Floridians.

In his State of the State address, Gov. Charlie Crist sought to assure Floridians that the \$12.2 billion coming to Florida over the next three years from the federal stimulus package would stave off repercussions of the economic collapse.

"This money will help us avoid tax increases and prevent deep cuts that would further burden Florida's families and businesses," Crist said. "Some argue the politics of the federal stimulus plan. I understand that. My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs."

Crist offered no new major initiatives.

Instead, he pushed lawmakers to approve his previous \$1.3 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar to protect the Everglades and to sign off on his agreement with the Seminole Indians to allow their expanded gambling in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars.

But, mostly, Crist opted for sentiment over details in a speech that clocked in at about 20 minutes.

"We must lift from our shoulders fear and pessimism and take up the mantle of persistence and determination to make the coming year better than the last," Crist said.

But fellow Republicans provided a dour counterpoint that focused on pragmatism and not politics.

"We need to be concerned, and then we need to also be braced for some unpopular decisions," said House Speaker Larry Cretul, R-Ocala. "I love optimism.

"But I also have been around long enough. Sometimes even optimism is not necessarily the solution to the problem."

Lawmakers said the federal stimulus package has become an unrealistic panacea for Floridians who may not be ready to accept an era of state government austerity.

"They think that someone is going to twang their magic twanger and we're going to cure all of the ills," said Sen. Jim King, R-Jacksonville, one of the longest serving legislators. "Everybody thinks it's not going to happen to them and that the state is going to come in, as we have done in the past, and make it whole. There's no way we can make it whole."

Added Senate budget chief J.D. Alexander, R-Winter Haven: "I think there is a misperception by many in the public that the stimulus dollars mean we will not have to have cuts in spending."

The state's budget has already plummeted by nearly \$7 billion to around \$66 billion as tax revenues drop for an unprecedented three straight years. For now, most of those cuts have been absorbed by trimming vacant positions, raising fees on things like boating licenses and court access, and borrowing from savings accounts set aside for other purposes. But with tax revenue falling hundreds of millions of dollars below expectations in the past few months, lawmakers said that next year could bring at least another \$5 billion budget hole that, if unchecked, would drop the state's annual budget to near \$60 billion.

Lawmakers said Tuesday that it would take at least a few weeks

to determine if Crist's promise that \$4.7 billion of federal stimulus money could fill next year's budget.

And on Friday the 13th next week, state economists will offer revised estimates that will guide lawmakers.

"We need some real numbers," said Cretul, adding that the current speculation is based on "a moving target."

Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, has broached the usually unmentionable topic of tax increases. And he seemed to gird his fellow senators for the need to prepare constituents for the worst.

"We must have the courage to speak forthrightly to Floridians and recognize that they have the capacity and the will to accept the truth and assess the facts," Atwater said.

Atwater said that preserving school funding would be his priority and everything else would be on the block.

"If it doesn't house, teach, feed, protect, heal or create a job for a Floridian, then this is the time to end it," he said.

Even as the 60-day countdown toward figuring out how the state will pay for next year's needs began, King said it was all but certain that lawmakers would have to return to Tallahassee a number of times later this year to trim the budget even more if the economy did not reverse itself quickly.

"The way that we're losing money now, we're still going to have a hole," said King. "Every day that goes by, we're going further and further in debt."

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Fight Over Everglades Restoration Awaits Crist

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Ledger, The

By KATE SPINNER

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Fight Over Everglades Restoration Awaits Crist

By KATE SPINNER
NYT Regional Newspapers

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When Gov. Charlie Crist declared his plan to restore the Everglades, environmental groups heralded it as one of the most important conservation efforts in the nation's history.

Now, eight months later, legislators in Crist's own Republican Party are working to derail the plan. With Florida deep in recession, legislators say taxpayers cannot afford \$1.34 billion to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar.

"The Legislature will have its say," said Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, who leads the Senate's Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee. "As the plan is currently constituted, there are a great deal of concerns."

Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton and Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, filed legislation that would block Crist's plan. Their bills are expected to produce one of the sharpest debates of the 60-day legislative session, which began Tuesday.

It is unclear which side has the upper hand, with legislators saying the debate could cross party lines. While some leaders expect Crist to prevail, no major lawmaker from either party has been outspoken in support.

Alarmed, environmental groups have doubled their lobbyists in Tallahassee and are sending out mailers across the state.

"This is the best possible opportunity for the Everglades at the worst possible economic time," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation, an advocacy group that helped Crist broker the U.S. Sugar deal.

The land Crist wants to buy forms a loose ring beneath Lake Okeechobee.

The state hopes to swap some of the property with other landowners to build a linear network of marshes and reservoirs that would reconnect the historic link between the big lake and the Everglades, allowing a flow of water that would restore marshes, rivers and bays that support abundant plant, aquatic and animal life.

Legislation proposed by Bennett and Williams would require voters in the South Florida Water Management District to approve the land purchase.

The bills would halt the district's ability to borrow, likely killing the deal with U.S. Sugar because it requires the district to get financing in place by fall.

Florida Crystals, a U.S. Sugar rival and a vocal opponent of Crist's plan, owns 155,000 acres in the Everglades region, almost a third of which lies in potential restoration paths.

The Lawrence Group, another agriculture company criticizing the deal, is angling to outbid the state to buy U.S. Sugar.

Bennett said it would be best to work with all three parties.

But environmentalists fear that if the deal falls through, U.S. Sugar will sell its land in pieces to developers, rock miners and other sugar growers. Such severed ownership would jeopardize restoration by making land acquisition more expensive.

Many legislators contend the state can get a cheaper plan and still save the Everglades.

"What the deal is now will not be the deal that finally evolves, but we might get exactly what we want in the end," Constantine said.

No legislators are standing firmly on Crist's side, not even those who support his goals.

"I think Everglades restoration has to be a very high priority for the state, but you also have to scrutinize the plan," said Rep. Keith Fitzgerald, D-Sarasota.

[Kate Spinner is a reporter for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune.]

CRIST'S BRIEF PITCH USE AID

03/04/2009

St. Petersburg Times
BOUSQUET, STEVE

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In a short and perfunctory State of the State speech, Gov. Charlie Crist urged the Legislature on Tuesday to rally behind his plan to spend billions in federal stimulus money as "a bridge to better economic times" in Florida.

Crist called his address "a dose of reality," muting his usual cheerfulness to state the obvious: An epidemic of foreclosures and business failures and the highest unemployment rate in 17 years has ravaged state revenues. Crist used the deepening economic crisis to justify injecting \$12.2 billion of federal money into the budget over three years.

"Some argue the politics of the federal stimulus plan," Crist said. "My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs - the needs of our students and teachers, the sick and the infirm, or those out of work."

In his third year in office, Crist is in the awkward spot of facing resistance within his own party in seeking to use stimulus money to jump-start the economy and get people back to work. Underscoring that point toward the end of his speech, Crist said: "We have to be willing to put solutions above who gets the credit."

Reviews were mixed. Some Republicans remain wary of the need to spend all the federal money and risk dramatically increasing the state's future budgetary obligations without knowing when the

economy will improve.

"Taking all of it may leave us in a worse position two or three years from now," said Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park. "The most important thing we have to do right now is do no harm."

Crist's 19-minute speech, delivered in a subdued tone with the aid of a TelePrompTer, was at 6 p.m. to attract live local TV news coverage. It brought polite applause from its target audience: the 160 legislators in the House chamber who will spend the next nine weeks scrutinizing his spending plans.

Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, said Crist spoke "in broad strokes" in making a political case - not a financial case - for spending stimulus money. "I don't think he quite addressed that," Galvano said, acknowledging "skepticism" about Crist's plan.

What worries some lawmakers is that Crist's \$66.5 billion budget proposal for next year is grounded in revenue information from last fall that will soon be eclipsed by another downturn in revenues when state economists produce the next forecast March 13.

"This budget was rolled out on the high-water mark, knowing that the tide was going down quickly," said Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach. "It is not tethered to reality."

Asked if Crist's speech was realistic, Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Winter Haven, said: "We'll know next week," referring to the revenue forecast. But the Senate budget chief said Crist did offer "hope, direction and leadership that speaks to many Floridians."

The governor also pressed lawmakers to approve a gambling agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida and a tuition increase he described as a "reform." He cited plans to purchase 180,000 acres of Everglades land from U.S. Sugar Corp. and to diversify Florida's energy supply "that balances solar, wind and nuclear" - leaving out offshore oil drilling that he endorsed during last summer's presidential campaign.

Crist's third State of the State address was the shortest in modern times. (His two previous ones were 29 and 30 minutes.) Former Gov. Jeb Bush's final speech in 2006 ran 35 minutes, and former Gov. Lawton Chiles' finale lasted 30 minutes.

The speech lacked the passion of Crist's previous two talks and used stilted language, such as "high potential business sectors" and "implementing these dollars quickly." Crist's rosy job-creation statistics were straight from President Obama's administration, and he used an outdated figure of \$25 billion to estimate the worth of property tax cut plans he has championed.

Such brevity meant Crist all but ignored his new batch of property tax-cut proposals while also skipping priorities of some fellow Republicans, such as a broad review of sales-tax exemptions.

"I love optimism," House Speaker Larry Cretul, R-Ocala, told reporters before Crist's speech. "But I also have been around long enough that sometimes, even optimism is not necessarily the solution to the problem."

Democrats strongly support Crist's eagerness to spend stimulus

money.

"He set the right tone," said Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, the only Democrat who serves with Crist on the Cabinet.

"Using these economic recovery funds will be a win for everyone - especially our children, the uninsured and Floridians worried about their jobs," said Rep. Geraldine Thompson, an Orlando Democrat who delivered her party's response to Crist's speech.

Crist also announced that Don Winstead, a deputy secretary of the Department of Children and Families, will advise him on spending Florida's share of stimulus money. Winstead will take a leave from his current post for up to a year to help Crist's staff.

Crist opened the speech by introducing the woman he married three months ago, his wife, Carole, who was seated in the front row of the visitors' gallery along with the governor's parents.

"I love you, honey," Crist said, looking up at his wife and ad-libbing a reference to his long bachelorhood: "I should have done that a long time ago."

Times/Herald staff writers Marc Caputo, Breanne Gilpatrick, Mary Ellen Klas and Alex Leary and St. Petersburg Times researcher Shirl Kennedy contributed to this report, which used information from the News Service of Florida. Steve Bousquet can be reached at bousquet@sptimes.com.

"We must commit to one another and to each and every Floridian that we will work toward more than just the perception of bipartisanship, but strive to seek honest-to-goodness cooperation. ... We have to be willing to put solutions above who gets the credit, and results above individual gain. People are counting on us, and for those of you who wish to keep score, I ask you to mark your wins and losses not for our parties, but for the people we serve."

Gov. Charlie Crist in his State of the State address

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Charlie Crist pide apoyo para gastar millones del plan de estímulo federal

03/04/2009

ElNuevoherald.com

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By S. BOUSQUET / Herald T. Bureau

TALLAHASSEE

En un breve y seco discurso de Estado del Estado, el gobernador Charlie Crist urgió ayer a la Legislatura a respaldar su plan de gastar miles de millones de los fondos del estímulo federal como "un puente para mejores tiempos económicos" en la Florida.

Crist llamó a su discurso "una dosis de realidad" y mostró una actitud alejada de su usual buen humor para subrayar lo evidente: una epidemia de ejecuciones hipotecarias y negocios en quiebra, y el mayor índice de desempleo en 17 años han devastado los ingresos del estado. Crist se basó en la cada vez más profunda crisis económica para justificar una inyección de \$12,200 millones en fondos federales en el presupuesto estatal durante un plazo de tres años.

"Algunos discuten las sutilezas políticas del plan fderal de estímulo", apuntó Crist. "Amigos míos, mientras nuestro pueblo está preocupado no podemos colocar la política por encima de sus necesidades: las necesidades de nuestros estudiantes y maestros, de los enfermos y los débiles, o de los que no tienen trabajo".

En su tercer año en el cargo, Crist se encuentra en la difícil posición de encarar la resistencia de su propio partido a usar los fondos de estímulo para revitalizar la economía y devolver los empleos a la gente. Subrayando esa idea hacia el final de su discurso, Crist dijo: "Tenemos que estar dispuestos a colocar las soluciones por encima del asunto de quién recibe el crédito".

Las opiniones estuvieron divididas. Algunos republicanos continúan reacios a gastar todo el dinero federal y arriesgarse a aumentar la deuda futura del estado sin saber cuándo eso mejorará a la economía.

"Tomarlo todo podría dejarnos en una posición peor en dos o tres años", dijo el representante Dean Cannon, republicano de Winter Park. "Lo más importante que tenemos que hacer en este momento es no hacer daño".

El representante Bill Galvano, republicano de Bradenton, dijo que Crist había hablado "a grandes rasgos" para defender razones políticas, y no razones financieras, para gastar el dinero del estímulo. "No me parece que se haya ocupado propiamente del tema", dijo Galvano, quien admitió su "escepticismo" acerca del plan de Crist.

Lo que preocupa a algunos legisladores es que la propuesta de presupuesto de Crist por \$66,500 millones para el año que viene se basa en información de ingresos del otoño pasado, que será pronto eclipsada por otro descenso en los ingresos cuando los economistas estatales den a conocer su próximo pronóstico el 13 de marzo.

"Este presupuesto fue sacado con la marea alta, sabiendo que pronto va a bajar", indicó el senador Dan Gelber, demócrata de Miami Beach. "No está basado en la realidad".

Al preguntársele si el discurso de Crist había sido realista, el senador J.D. Alexander, republicano de Winter Haven, afirmó: "Lo

sabremos la semana próxima", refiriéndose al pronóstico de ingresos. Pero el jefe de presupuesto del Senado opinó que Crist había brindado "esperanza, dirección y liderazgo que hablan directamente a muchos floridianos".

El gobernador presionó asimismo a los legisladores a que aprobaran un acuerdo de juego con la tribu seminola de la Florida, y un aumento de la matrícula que él describió como una "reforma". Mencionó planes para comprar 180,000 acres de terreno de los Everglades de U.S. Sugar Corp. y de diversificar las fuentes de energía "balanceando la energía solar, eólica y nuclear" --sin mencionar la perforación cerca de las costas que apoyó durante la campaña presidencial del verano.

Al discurso le faltó la pasión de las anteriores alocuciones de Crist y tuvo un lenguaje ampuloso.

GLADES FIGHT AWAITS CRIST

03/04/2009

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

SPINNER, KATE

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When Gov. Charlie Crist declared his plan to restore the Everglades, environmental groups heralded it as one of the most important conservation efforts in the nation's history.

Now, eight months later, legislators in Crist's own Republican Party are working to derail the plan. With Florida deep in recession, legislators say taxpayers cannot afford \$1.34 billion to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar.

"The Legislature will have its say," said Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, who leads the Senate's Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee. "As the plan is currently constituted, there are a great deal of concerns."

Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton and Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, filed legislation that would block Crist's plan. Their bills are expected to produce one of the sharpest debates of the 60-day legislative session, which began Tuesday.

It is unclear which side has the upper hand, with legislators saying the debate could cross party lines. While some leaders expect Crist to prevail, no major lawmaker from either party has been outspoken in support.

Alarmed, environmental groups have doubled their lobbyists in Tallahassee and are sending out mailers across the state.

"This is the best possible opportunity for the Everglades at the worst possible economic time," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation, an advocacy group that helped Crist broker the U.S. Sugar deal.

Before Crist announced the stunning deal to buy U.S. Sugar's land in June, Everglades restoration hinged on an unproven and far

more costly plan by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to store 1.6 billion gallons of water a day underground.

The land Crist wants to buy forms a loose ring beneath Lake Okeechobee. The state hopes to swap some of the property with other landowners to build a linear network of marshes and reservoirs that would reconnect the historic link between the big lake and the Everglades, allowing a flow of water that would restore marshes, rivers and bays that support abundant plant, aquatic and animal life.

Legislation proposed by Bennett and Williams would require voters in the South Florida Water Management District to approve the land purchase. The bills would halt the district's ability to borrow, likely killing the deal with U.S. Sugar because it requires the district to get financing in place by fall.

"I think it's a wonderful goal," Bennett said of restoring the Everglades. "What I'm trying to do is find an economically feasible way to do it."

Bennett wants the state to secure exactly the land it needs, rather than swap land.

Florida Crystals, a U.S. Sugar rival and a vocal opponent of Crist's plan, owns 155,000 acres in the Everglades region, almost a third of which lies in potential restoration paths.

The Lawrence Group, another agriculture company criticizing the deal, is angling to outbid the state to buy U.S. Sugar.

Bennett said it would be best to work with all three parties.

But environmentalists fear that if the deal falls through, U.S. Sugar will sell its land in pieces to developers, rock miners and other sugar growers. Such severed ownership would jeopardize restoration by making land acquisition more expensive.

Many legislators contend the state can get a cheaper plan and still save the Everglades.

"What the deal is now will not be the deal that finally evolves, but we might get exactly what we want in the end," Constantine said.

No legislators are standing firmly on Crist's side, not even those who support his goals.

"I think Everglades restoration has to be a very high priority for the state, but you also have to scrutinize the plan," said Rep. Keith Fitzgerald, D-Sarasota.

Criticism of Crist's plan and lack of lawmakers' support, prompted massive public outreach by worried Everglades advocates.

Recent mailers urging voters to call legislators in support of the U. S. Sugar deal marks the beginning of a long battle, said Thom Rumberger, chairman of the Everglades Trust, a lobbying arm of Everglades Foundation.

Fitzgerald expects the Everglades to be second only to budget cuts as the biggest fight in this year's session.

"It could conceivably be an issue that doesn't break down on

party lines," Fitzgerald said.

In the end, a deal will take shape that achieves Crist's goals, predicted Erik Eikenberg, chief of staff for Gov. Crist. He said the state has begun negotiating with Florida Crystals over land swaps that will likely be a part of the final plan in September.

"We're still optimistic that this opportunity will come to fruition," Eikenberg said.

Eikenberg also said the governor's office wants to send money into communities that would suffer widespread job losses when U. S. Sugar dissolves. The governor's budget includes \$5 million for economic development in the region and renewable energy grants.

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FOREVER THE EVERGLADES

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Sun Sentinel

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The Everglades Foundation raised \$2 million from the more than 620 attendees at its fourth annual "For Everglades Benefit," held recently at The Breakers Palm Beach.

Multi-talented comedian/actor/director Wil Shriner's penchant for one-liners and friendship with honoree, Carl Hiaasen, served him well as host of the Everglades Foundation Benefit. The benefit attracted Thalia, Jimmy Buffet, Jack Nicklaus, Miami Dolphins owner Steve Ross and more. In addition to celebrating the achievements of Hiaasen, the best-selling author of *Striptease*, *Skinnydip*, *Hoot* and other Florida-based novels, supporters demonstrated their generosity and commitment to Everglades restoration efforts during an auction which provided opportunities to bid on scientific research initiatives.

"The pending U.S. Sugar Corporation land acquisition will provide us with the opportunity to protect our water supply and natural resources while creating hundreds of good paying jobs on restoration projects. It goes without saying that 2009 will be a landmark year for the Everglades and the millions of people who benefit from the recreational and economic opportunities it provides," said Kirk Fordham, CEO, Everglades Foundation. "This was our best-attended event ever. Foundation supporters who cherish our waterways, our parks and other natural resources realize this was a fantastic opportunity to support the work we do to preserve a national treasure."

Event proceeds go to support critically needed scientific research initiatives that advance Everglades restoration. The board of directors of the Everglades Foundation funds 100 percent of the Foundation's fundraising and administrative costs -- resulting in all contributions for the Benefit being used entirely for Everglades restoration programs.

"Our benefit committee, co-chairs and board of directors did a superb job in making this a successful event," added Fordham.

Benefit co-chairpersons were Thalia and Tommy Mottola, Cindi and Nick Bollettieri, Elaine and Ken Langone and Sonia and Paul Tudor Jones. David Ober and Lia Reed led the benefit's dinner committee.

For more information, visit www.evergladesfoundation.org. *

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