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Crist restocks water board with backers of his Everglades restoration plan

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02/25/2010

Palm Beach Post

Michael Bender and Paul Quinlan

Environmentalists who favor Gov. Charlie Crist's monumental Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. saw the odds of success improve Wednesday, when Crist named two allies and re-appointed a third to the board of the South Florida Water Management District, in advance of another crucial vote on the half-billion-dollar purchase.

Crist named Weston commercial litigation attorney Glenn Waldman and Anne "Sandy" Batchelor-Robjohns, chair and co-CEO of the Miami Beach-based Batchelor Foundation, to the nine-member board. He also re-appointed longtime environmentalist and Everglades advocate Shannon Estenez to another four-year term.

The district manages Everglades restoration for the state, as well as water supply and flood control across 16 south and central Florida counties in which it levies property taxes.

Waldman, 49, grew up in North Miami and graduated from University of Florida law school at age 22. He was the divorce attorney to former Miami Subs and SunCruz Casinos owner Konstantinos "Gus" Boulis and later represented the estate after Boulis' gangland-style killing in 2001.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Waldman said he was "absolutely 100 percent in favor" of the U.S. Sugar deal. Aside from having donated to Crist, he described himself as "apolitical."

"I thought I would apply and put something back and contribute in a meaningful way," Waldman said.

Batchelor-Robjohns, 56, could not be reached for comment. She has served on the board of Audubon of Florida and her foundation has donated to Everglades Foundation. She is the daughter-in-law of George Batchelor, who made his fortune as an airline operator and aircraft broker.

The new members arrive just before an anticipated March 11 board vote on whether to extend the land purchase contract's closing deadline so that a legal challenge before the Florida Supreme Court can be fended off.

Crist and environmental allies say the purchase would accomplish more for the dying ecosystem than anything else in at least a decade, securing 72,500 acres of land that could be used to re-establish the historic, flowing connection between Lake Okeechobee and the southern Everglades. The district would pay for the \$536 million deal by issuing bonds and without raising taxes, Crist has pledged.

On Wednesday, Crist said he made the appointments with an eye toward the Everglades land deal.

"We're going to keep firing the canon and doing the job," Crist said.

But opponents, including 11-year district board member Mike Collins, who twice voted against the deal, have portrayed it as a taxpayer-financed bailout of a struggling sugar company.

Collins, former president of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, said the appointees brought little to the table beyond a willingness to vote "yes" on U.S. Sugar.

"It would have been nice if the governor had put someone in there who was involved in water management," Collins said. "I don't know what criteria he was using, but it sounds like it was who would support the U.S. Sugar deal."

U.S. Sugar's chief rival, the politically powerful Florida Crystals Corp., owned by the Fanjuls of Palm Beach, and the Miccosukee Indian Tribe, which lives on reservation land in the Everglades, will ask the Florida Supreme Court in April to block the bond issue on grounds that the deal serves no clear public purpose.

Crist shakes up South Florida water board

02/24/2010

St. Petersburg Times - Online

Bousquet, Steve

Gov. Charlie Crist appointed two new members to the South Florida Water Management District and confirmed that he demanded assurances from the newcomers that they would support his plan for a \$536-million purchase of U.S. Sugar property for Everglades restoration.

Crist appointed Anne "Sandy" Batchelor-Robjohns, 56, of Miami Beach, co-CEO of The Batchelor Foundation, and environmental and land use lawyer Glenn Waldman, 49, of Weston. Crist also reappointed Shannon Estenoz, 42, a research assistant at FAU, to a new four-year term. Batchelor-Robjohns will replace Gladys Perez on the five-member governing board, and Waldman will replace Michael Collins.

Crist's litmus-test approach to the water-board appointments recalls his insistence that new appointees to the Public Service Commission take a skeptical view of a major rate increase sought by Florida Power & Light.

"I did that personally. Damn right," Crist said. "The litmus test is, you'll protect the Everglades. You'll protect the environment. You'll protect the water down there. It is the Water Management District."

Crist picks South Florida water managers

02/24/2010

Sun Sentinel - Online

Reid, Andy

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Gov. Charlie Crist Wednesday reappointed Broward County's representative to the South Florida Water Management District board and added two new faces to help direct the agency that guards against flooding, protects drinking water supplies and leads Everglades restoration.

Crist appointed Shannon Estenoz, 42 of Plantation to another four-year term on the volunteer, nine-member board. Estenoz is a former senior policy advisor for the National Parks Conservation Association and one of the environmental community's key advocates on the board.

Estenoz has been a staunch supporter of the governor's proposal for the district to spend \$536 million to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration.

Crist also named Anne "Sandy" Batchelor-Robjohns, 56, of Miami Beach and Glenn Waldman, 49, of Weston to fill two remaining vacancies on the water management district board.

Batchelor-Robjohns has served on the board of Audubon of Florida and Waldman is an attorney with experience handling environmental, construction and land use disputes, according to the governor's office.

The governor's appointments must be ratified by the Florida Senate.

The appointments come before a crucial water management district vote expected next month on the pending U.S. Sugar deal. To keep the deal alive, the district board would need to approve a contract extension with U.S. Sugar to allow more time for the Florida Supreme Court to rule on a legal challenge to the district's plan to borrow the money for the land deal.

Opponents to the deal, including the Miccosukee Tribe and sugar producer Florida Crystals, say it costs taxpayers too much and would take money from other stalled Everglades projects.

Supporters, including many environmental groups, contend that the deal provides a historic opportunity to buy strategically located land that can be used to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

U.S. Sugar, union members approve new labor contract

02/23/2010

Naples Daily News - Online

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CLEWISTON U.S. Sugar said today that negotiations that began Jan. 28 resulted in a new labor contract that was approved Monday by its union workers.

The previous labor contract was scheduled to expire at midnight Monday.

Currently the company's sugar industrial and railroad workers are members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Lake Local Lodge No. 57.

"We look forward to continuing a successful partnership with the IAMAW and our Union workers," said Judy Sanchez, director of corporate communications.

"The hard working union members of U.S. Sugar Corp. overwhelmingly ratified a new three-year deal with the company. We would like to thank U.S. Sugar for working with us in these difficult economic times. We feel this contract was fair and we will continue to work with the company in the future," said Robert Miller, IAMAW business representative.

The collective bargaining agreement between U.S. Sugar and the IAMAW, Local No. 57 was approved by a majority of IAMAW Local No. 57's roughly 400 members Monday. Terms of the contract included an annual wage increase and an annual bonus payment. Bonus payments in subsequent years may be adjusted based on financial performance. Details such as the amount of the wage increase and bonus were unavailable.

Among a host of issues negotiated in the proposed contract, Sanchez said that differences regarding efficient management of factory operations, work schedules and work allocation along with economic issues were satisfactorily resolved.

"We have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in a state-of-the-art sugar manufacturing facility to be competitive in

the global sugar economy," Sanchez said. "Maintaining positive labor relations is an important component of our overall efficiency."

U.S. Sugar reaches deal with union

02/23/2010

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Palm Beach Post - Online

Susan Salisbury

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

U.S. Sugar Corp. and a union representing about 400 sugar industrial and railroad workers have reached a new three-year labor contract. It was approved Monday by a majority of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Lake Local Lodge 57, the company said today.

Negotiations began Jan. 28. The previous labor contract was scheduled to expire at midnight Monday. Union president Greg Thompson said workers are receiving a \$400 signing bonus, which may be adjusted in subsequent years, and 2 percent raises each year, as well as pension increases. The total value of the increases is \$3 million for the three years, he said.

Robert Miller, the union's business representative, said, "The hard working union members of U.S. Sugar Corporation overwhelmingly ratified a new three-year deal with the company. We would like to thank U.S. Sugar for working with us in these difficult economic times. We feel this contract was fair and we will continue to work with the company in the future."

Judy Sanchez, the company's director of corporate communications, said, that differences regarding efficient management of factory operations, work schedules and work allocation along with economic issues were resolved.

