



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

OPINION

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SFWMD Land Acquisitions Serve Restoration Goals

Environmental restoration took a much-welcomed step forward this month with federal and state consensus on a suite of projects to achieve Everglades water quality improvements. Timely implementation of the new projects – to be built by the South Florida Water Management District over the coming years – would not be possible without needed tracts of land already in public ownership.

Regrettably, effective strategies used a decade ago to acquire land for restoration purposes have recently come under criticism. It's easy to forget the context in which Florida's explosive growth in the early and mid-2000s provided the impetus – and the resources – to place hundreds of thousands of acres of land into public ownership.

Anyone who lived in Florida at that time will remember its fast-paced real estate market. As development increased and property values escalated, it made sense for the District to set aside lands ahead of the design and construction of projects associated with long-term restoration programs. One of these programs was the state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, just getting under way. The District's responsibility as its local sponsor was unambiguous: acquire land for the restoration projects.

The land acquisition program accomplished its goals. From 2000 to 2008, the District put close to 165,000 acres into public ownership for Kissimmee River Restoration, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and other water resource purposes. And, the \$1.6 billion invested in land during those years has brought tangible results. In the restored Kissimmee, for example, we have vastly expanded the river's floodplain, holding more water north of Lake Okeechobee and thereby reducing harmful discharges to coastal estuaries. Throughout this floodplain, wetlands have expanded and fish and wildlife have returned, including nine species of long-absent waterfowl. Moreover, the public has gained a recreational gem in the heart of the northern Everglades.

A challenge then – and now – is that the District's need for certain parcels is determined by specific geographic locations where water resource protection and restoration are needed. As a result, some acquisitions took place through the state's formal condemnation process, which increases costs. Wherever possible, the District worked to achieve negotiated acquisitions, even if the final price exceeded appraised value. In the

long run, that approach saved taxpayer dollars rather than squandered them, as some critics have charged.

The years of intensive land buying are behind us. We are now focused on putting publicly owned acreage to its very best use, whether building on-site projects, swapping for lands in more critical locations or leveraging it to gain the resources needed to carry out restoration work.

At the same time, we are looking internally to assess what worked well for our land programs in the past and what needs revision for today. Already, the District has taken multiple steps to improve many of its land management processes. These include: updates to our leasing policies; organizational changes to better align real estate, land management and land stewardship activities; inventorying District lands to identify properties not directly needed for restoration or mission-specific purposes; review of the District's land surplus protocols; and close coordination with the Department of Environmental Protection for land surplus as well as any needed acquisitions.

In all cases, the District's policy making, land acquisitions and surplus activities are carried out under Governing Board direction in accordance with state statutes and as part of an open and public process. To further enhance transparency, we have posted land-related documents and contracts to the District's website, providing for ready access by the public.

These steps reflect our continued focus District-wide on reviewing and improving the agency's business, administration and operational practices. Our ongoing goal is to ensure the agency is operating prudently, effectively and efficiently in the best interest of South Florida's water resources and its taxpayers.

Melissa L. Meeker
Executive Director
South Florida Water Management District