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Scenic Watch is a free bi-monthly publication of Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Inc., dedicated to the preservation, protection and enhancement of Florida's scenic heritage. Individuals, organizations and government agencies are welcome as members. [Join Scenic Florida now](#) to protect our scenic qualities.

National News:

Electronic LED billboards are lighting up the skys as well as local and state legislative agendas. From Montana that banned LED billboards to Flowery Branch, GA that passed an ordinance establishing a 53 second duration for signs on Interstates along with separation, transition times and lighting requirements, city and county commissioners and state legislators are trying to enact legislation. Safety is a primary concern driving the legislation. Flowery Branch, a city of around 6,000 near Atlanta, established a duration for each image matched to the highway speed limit so that a typical motorist would not be distracted by a changing sign. In addition, they established a separation of 5,000 feet between LED signs. Some states such as New York are considering similar legislation for their entire highway system.

An increasing number of cities and counties are adopting bans or at least moratoriums until the safety issue is better understood. Some significant studies have already been conducted. You can get more information at www.scenic.org

The landmark story of the month has to be the Everglades restoration made possible by the \$1.7 Billion purchase. The [article below](#) is long but gives an insight into how it happened.

Bartow County joins the growing number of counties that understand the value of scenic preservation to the quality of life and to the economic development.

Editor

Billboards

Bonita council prohibiting LED-lighted signs — for now

By [CANDACE BRAUN](#) ([Contact](#))

8:48 p.m., Wednesday, June 18, 2008

It looks like it's lights out in Bonita Springs — for light emitting diode (LED) lights, anyway. After multiple debates, City Council has decided to prohibit LED-lighted signs in the city for the time being.

The issue came up during a recent overhaul of the city's sign ordinance, which involved amending the Lee County sign ordinance to tailor it to the city's needs. Fears that Bonita Springs could grow to resemble the bright lights of Las Vegas, New York City or Orlando's International Drive sparked the discussion, which was the focal point of its first reading on the June 4 council meeting as well as Wednesday's.

"The first image I found when I Googled 'LED lights' was of Times Square," Councilman John Spear said, also noting that although he knew this was an extreme case, he said it illustrated his point of how these lighted signs could clutter Bonita Springs' skies. "If there's a place for them in the community, then I think we should take a more regulated approach."

Though City Attorney Audrey Vance has spent the past two weeks researching LED lights and their potential impact on the community, she wasn't an expert on the topic, Spear said, and so the council decided to hold off on approving or creating regulations for LED signs until they knew more information about them.

In the meantime, business owners and advertisers can go through the zoning process and request a special exception to this rule, which would allow them to put up an LED sign if they make a compelling enough argument.

"Let them sell you on why an LED sign will not be a problem in that area, in that situation," Vance told City Council.

In addition to aesthetic concerns, these lighted signs could be a distraction to motorists, posing safety hazards, which is another reason why council members felt they needed to research the matter further before allowing LED signs in the city.

The council's decision doesn't involve prohibiting LED signs exclusively, however. In the council's motion, Vance was instructed to amend the ordinance to prohibit — for now — any other digital signs producing the same bright, TV screen-like appearance that may emerge within the next few years.

This addition to the motion was made after Ric Pritchett of Carter-Pritchett advertising urged them to reconsider prohibiting the signs altogether.

He compared the movement from traditional billboards to LED ones to how e-mail replaced fax machines as a more efficient means of communication. Years ago, when a person wanted to send a message quickly, they'd fax it, Pritchett said.

"Now you look at a fax and you say, why wouldn't you send an e-mail?" he said.

One of the major advantages of using these types of lights is that they allow a business to change its copy at any time, almost instantaneously, he said. In the past, it could take a week to repaint or alter a billboard.

"Leave the door open so that we can move forward in our industry as other companies move forward in their industries," he said.

After the ordinance was approved, Councilman Bill Lonkart made a motion to have the council staff conduct further research into LED signs to gain more information about their safety, aesthetics and the potential energy savings that LED lights could provide. The motion passed unanimously.

While discussing the ordinance, the council also decided to remove maximum height restrictions for street addresses so that the letters have to be a minimum of six inches tall but can be as large as business owners want.

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Farmland Protection

Agriculture was protected

By Special to the Times-Union

Farmers and ranchers in Florida received good news recently.

Two major rural land conservation programs, the federal farm bill and the state's Rural and Family Lands Protection Program were approved recently.

These programs can help family farmers hold onto their land by providing them with cash payments or tax incentives.

With over 1 million acres of our best farm and ranchland being lost each year, it is critical to protect this strategic American resource.

Congress approved the \$307 billion farm bill on May 22 when the House and Senate voted to override a presidential veto.

The 34-page trade section that was missing from the Senate's bill may be resolved as a separate bill sometime in June.

The farm bill includes about \$30 billion for farmers to idle their land and for other environmental programs.

Congress supported major new funding for the Farmland Protection Program and Grassland Reserve Program.

Both programs purchase conservation easements.

Congress supported a two-year extension (retroactive to the beginning of this year) of the increased tax incentive for donations of conservation easements that expired on Jan. 1.

The increased conservation easement tax incentives, that are part of the farm bill, allow qualifying farmers and ranchers to deduct up to 100 percent (landowners 50 percent) of their income the year of the conservation easement donation.

It also allows the remaining value of the donated easement to be carried forward for 15 years with the remaining value deducted from their income.

Agriculture makes up Florida's second-largest industry and contributes over \$87 billion annually to the state's economy.

Florida ranks first nationally in citrus production, second in vegetables and horticulture, and fourth in silviculture.

In Duval County, the value of agricultural products sold in 2002 totaled \$22 million (2002 Census of Agriculture NASS).

These rural land conservation programs will help ensure that agriculture is a viable and thriving part of Duval County's local economy.

Please show your support! Contact U.S. Senators Mel Martinez and Bill Nelson and thank them for voting for the farm bill.

BUSY KISLIG-SHIRE BYERLY,

executive director,

Conservation Trust for Florida, Micanopy

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Political pluck, power dovetailed in state-U.S. Sugar deal

By [STACEY SINGER](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Saturday, June 28, 2008

Standing on his skiff, hedge fund billionaire Paul Tudor Jones II grew more confident with each cast into the salty shallows of Florida Bay - snook or no snook.

His goal was more ambitious than catching a few fish. He hoped to persuade Florida's newly elected governor, Charlie Crist, to loosen Big Sugar's grip on the agency charged with restoring Florida's Everglades, the South Florida Water Management District.

Success would be like catching a 16-pound bonefish, something huge, and maddeningly elusive under Gov. Jeb Bush. It would mean real progress toward Everglades restoration. Progress toward a clean and healthy Florida Bay.

No other governor, not even Big-Tobacco-slaying Democrat Lawton Chiles, had been willing to tackle sugar in hand-to-hand combat. Fighting sugar head-on was political suicide. Yet surrounded by sparkling water and mangrove flats in February 2007, Crist was receptive.

For more than 30 years, the environmental aristocrats who bankrolled state advocacy groups have sounded the same theme: Return farmland to wetlands, so that water can flow like a sheet from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, and finally into Florida Bay, the way nature intended.

Yet farm interests stood in the way, and in Florida government, they have remained as fixed as the horizon. In nearly 10 years, the plan to restore the Everglades had never broached a Big-Sugar buyout. All the more reason that jaws dropped when Crist last week stood side-by-side with the U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Buker, announcing the largest conservation land deal in the history of Florida, a \$1.75 billion plan to buy the 80-year-old company's assets.

How that moment came to be has been a mystery to many, from sugar industry watchers to political insiders. Crist has long had an interest in the Everglades and has assembled a staff with similar interests. But the large and complex deal also bears the imprint of Jones, a top Wall Street expert in commodities markets and a passionate conservationist who owns a vacation home in Islamorada.

Jones, traveling in Africa, did not respond to e-mailed questions about his role. But his colleagues and advisers to Crist acknowledge a relationship has developed between the two, one so close that Jones reportedly knew of Sugar's openness to sell its assets in November, several months before the executive director of the South Florida Water Management District or even Florida Secretary of Environmental Protection Mike Sole.

Crist's chief of staff, Eric Eikenberg, acknowledged the fishing trips and phone calls Crist and Jones have shared.

"There is a relationship there that has been formed out of respect," said Eikenberg. "They've had multiple conversations since the governor took office."

Crist is a Republican, and Jones is a top fund-raiser for Barack Obama, a Democrat. Still, the longtime politician and the liberal billionaire have much in common. Both found their environmental epiphany at the end of a fishing pole. Fish don't like dirty water.

And both had crossed Big Sugar before. Jones had seen Crist willing to vote against the sugar lobby 12 years earlier, back when both men supported a penny-a-pound sugar tax to pay for pollution clean-up. Jones had bankrolled the sugar-tax campaign with an \$11 million investment. His devotion to that cause provoked U.S. Sugar's Buker to tell *The Miami Herald* in 1996 that Jones was "a cockroach."

"You shine a light on him and he runs away," Buker said then.

The sugar tax try failed.

Tide turns for industry

In the intervening years, both Crist and Jones grew more powerful. Jones ascended from commodities trader to Wall Street wizard, becoming one of the wealthiest men in the world according to *Forbes*, zipping in and out of about 30 commodities markets and assembling companies, one of which manages an estimated \$20 billion in assets. Colleagues say he hasn't traded in sugar in 15 years, and they insist he does not have any financial interest in the debt the state plans to issue for the purchase.

The 53-year-old father of four has been as devoted to his family, his recreation and his philanthropies as he is his hedge funds. Married to Australian model Sonja, Jones founded New York's poverty-fighting Robin Hood Foundation, and he helped found Miami's Everglades Foundation, devoted to restoring the environment.

Jones, who was born in Memphis, is an avid hunter and fisherman.

In Greenwich, Conn., he's known for decorating his waterfront mansion at Christmastime in such an elaborate manner that he must hire off-duty police to manage the traffic.

In Islamorada, he's known for his ownership of the Coral Bowl, a local bowling alley that he saved from closure for his children and their friends in 2000.

Jones got his start trading cotton and earned a reputation as a hedge fund genius at a young age after predicting the stock market crash of 1987. His environmental awakening came through his Islamorada neighbor, the late George Barley, who was his frequent fishing companion. Active in politics, he hedges his donations the same way he does his investments, becoming one of Obama's top fund-raisers even as he gave the maximum to Rudolph Giuliani and Mitt Romney.

Crist, meanwhile, skipped like a stone from law-and-order legislator to attorney general to green governor, thanks in part, to the half-million worth of Jones' checks to the state Republican Party.

Sugar's star had not risen so high. By last summer, the sugar industry found itself facing unprecedented challenges. Free trade pressures in Washington threatened its long-protected federal subsidies. The black-gold muck that nourished its cane would not last forever, but there was a backup plan to build hundreds of thousands of homes in Palm Beach County's Everglades Agricultural Area. The real estate downturn threatened that plan.

Meanwhile, the company was fighting a bitter and costly lawsuit from its employee-shareholders. They had learned that the company's board, dominated by descendants of Charles Stewart Mott, had nixed an offer that would have given them nearly \$100 a share more than U.S. Sugar told them their shares were worth.

Amid this, a drought and a newly environmentally sensitive water district board was, U.S. Sugar felt, threatening the dependability of its water supply.

Two months after his Florida Bay fishing trip with Jones, Crist had made two key appointments to the water district board: Miami attorney Eric Buermann was a former general counsel to the Bush-Cheney campaign, but he also carried pro-environment credentials such as a membership in the Theodore Roosevelt Society. Shannon Estenoz, a civil engineer, was a leading Everglades advocate.

Environmental leaders were thrilled with Estenoz and cautiously optimistic about Buermann. The sugar industry was less pleased, particularly with Estenoz.

Buermann became chairman of the governing board, with Estenoz as vice chair.

And things changed. There was a time when the water district could be counted on to allow farmers to

recycle their polluted runoff into Lake Okeechobee when necessary. But when the historically low lake levels struck last summer, Crist's appointees led the charge in voting against such backpumping. It made no sense to allow pollution of the waterways when they were spending billions to restore and clean them, they said.

"It was the first time they had lost in the 20 years I've been around," said Tallahassee lawyer and environmental advocate Thom Rumberger. "They got slapped in the face."

U.S. Sugar's Robert Coker asked Crist for a meeting. In November, Coker sent two lobbyists, Brian Ballard and Mac Stipanovich, to "help him better understand our perspective," Coker said, to see that he was "sensitive to our need for sustainability."

They discussed backpumping, lake levels, court-ordered pollution controls. Crist ended the meeting by shocking the lobbyists.

"What the governor said was, 'There are a lot of complex matters. Maybe what we ought to do is just buy U.S. Sugar out,' " Coker said.

Ballard and Stipanovich took the proposal back to Coker.

"I was very stunned. That was not the expectation we had for that meeting. What we hoped to get out of that meeting was a commitment to work on issues in a cooperative way," he said.

And yet when the proposals went back to U.S. Sugar's board, it was not rejected.

"When you own something and build something for 80 years, you develop an emotional attachment to the business and to the land. The descendants of Charles Stewart Mott, who make up the majority of our board, have had offers in the past for all or parts of our company and our land. They never felt it met their criteria," he said.

But Crist's offer had their attention.

"We believe that our company and our board and our shareholders have gotten two things. We've gotten reasonable fair value - not what we thought we could have gotten," Coker said. "And at the same time, they know these lands are going to be used to ensure the future of the Florida Everglades. I think that's a legacy they were comfortable with."

At Crist's announcement, a day on which God, Teddy Roosevelt and the Louisiana Purchase were invoked, Coker found himself shaking hands with George Barley's widow, Mary, co-founder with Jones of the Everglades Foundation.

It was a strange moment. Coker and Barley had been bitter political opponents for decades.

Coker said Crist brought fresh faces to the issue. Diana Sawaya-Crane had worked for Crist when he was attorney general. He made her a cabinet aide and designated her an environmental adviser. Eikenberg, a former aide to former U.S. Rep. E. Clay Shaw, had worked on Everglades funding in Washington.

Looking for the big 'wow'

Meanwhile, Michael Sole, Crist's new environmental protection secretary, had regulated pollution and other matters in 17 years with the agency. Sole had experience organizing state deals to buy and preserve large tracts of land, including the Babcock Ranch Preserve.

In February, Crist asked all of them to work on assessing the feasibility and desirability of acquiring U.S. Sugar's land.

"Every day, the concept became more and more, 'Not only is this viable, but, wow, this is the right thing to do for Everglades restoration,' " Sole said.

A year earlier, Sole and Eikenberg had sat in a briefing on Everglades restoration, looking at a map with more than 200 small and complex projects needed to store dirty farm water and runoff, clean it, and enable it to flow when needed into the Everglades.

Looking at the map, Eikenberg said he could only shake his head at the complexity and expense. Water district Executive Director Carol Wehle recalls how Eikenberg ended that initial meeting.

"He said, 'This is messy and it's complicated, and it's a lot of little projects. Isn't there some big wow that would move a lot of this forward?' " Wehle recalled.

Buying U.S. Sugar didn't even enter her mind. It was never on the table. Eikenberg and Sole said they didn't raise the possibility, either.

"It never would have occurred to me to say, 'Hey, what if we bought out U.S. Sugar,' " Wehle said.

That the day had come was as amazing to Wehle as it was to Eikenberg, Sole and even U.S. Sugar's Buker, who had fought the environmentalists so hard, for so long.

Asked what had transpired in 10 years of Everglades restoration to make U.S. Sugar suddenly receptive to selling its assets, Buker, put it simply: "What changed in 10 years ago from now is the people have changed."

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Scenic Highways & Trails

Panel Votes to Help Preserve Scenic Road

By [Tom Palmer](#)

THE LEDGER

Published: Sunday, June 22, 2008 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Sunday, June 22, 2008 at 8:39 a.m.

BARTOW | Scenic Highway winds 39 miles from Haines City to Frostproof through a landscape where sparsely developed lakeshores, forests and citrus groves are giving way to industrial parks and sprawling subdivisions.

Wednesday, the County Commission voted unanimously to amend its growth plan to offer a way to soften the march of development along this scenic and historic stretch of highway.

The growth plan amendment sets up a framework to map the area's land uses through an overlay and to later invoke higher development standards and incentives for preservation.

Specifically, the amendment will:

Establish incentives to increase open space in areas identified as scenic vistas by allowing increased development or speedy development review of other land.

Establish higher development standards involving landscaping, street lighting, signs, building heights, walls and fences, and other provisions.

Set up a coordination system between Polk County and the seven cities along the corridor to pass the county's proposed standards into the city codes.

The idea of special protections along Scenic Highway grew out of concerns that arose in 2002 among homeowners in the Lake of the Hills area between Lake Wales and Dundee, the area around Bok Tower and in Babson Park, a suburban community south of Lake Wales.

Homeowners and preservationists were concerned that uncontrolled development could reduce their quality of life and potentially destroy significant historic, cultural and environmental features along Scenic Highway.

That led initially to a decision by the Florida Department of Transportation to designate the corridor as a Florida Scenic Highway in 2005.

That was followed by a series of public meetings to suggest ways to protect the corridor through changes in the county's growth plan.

However, the County Commission canceled a hearing on the initial version of the growth plan under pressure from developers and major landowners - who had not participated in the public meetings - who were critical of the proposal.

That opposition surfaced in a public meeting in Lake Wales early in 2006 at which landowners and developers accused county officials of trying to seize their land.

The current plan, through a committee organized by landowners and composed of all the interest groups along Scenic Highway, won initial approval from the Polk County Planning Commission in February with little opposition.

Jack Brandon, a Lake Wales lawyer who represented major landowners in the corridor, called the process that resulted in the amendment "outstanding."

The growth plan amendment is intended to protect some of the corridor's important assets, which include Bok Tower, Crooked Lake and the remaining undeveloped sections of the Lake Wales Ridge.

Bok Tower, a National Historic Landmark, was opened in 1929 on one of the highest points in peninsular Florida. It is a world-famous carillon tower surrounded by a 250-acre sanctuary whose serenity will be protected by efforts along the corridor, supporters hope.

Crooked Lake is the only Outstanding Florida Water in Polk County and one of 41 designated water bodies statewide. The list includes such notable water bodies as the Suwanee and Apalachicola rivers and the marine waters surrounding the Florida Keys.

The Lakes Wales Ridge is the home of more than 30 globally imperiled species of plants and animals. They range from showy flowering plants such as the pygmy fringe tree and scrub blazing star to the Florida scrub-jay, the only species of bird found exclusively in Florida.

The next step will be to revise the county's development regulations to include specific provisions that would govern future development in the corridor.

County planner Tom Wodrich said he expects the development regulations to go to the Planning Commission this fall.

Before the formal hearing, a public meeting will be planned to explain the impact of the development regulations, he said.

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Other Scenic News

Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor

