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Jeb puts \$310 M in pot for Babcock **Budget plan embraced by officials, developer and environmentalists**

By Betty Parker

Gov. Jeb Bush has put enough money — \$310 million — in his final budget as the state's chief executive to save 74,000 acres of Southwest Florida land for public use.

If legislators agree when they meet in March, the land that makes up more than 80 percent of what's known as Babcock Ranch could be in public ownership by next year.

"It is essential that the Legislature appropriate this money so that we can close on this treasure," Bush said Wednesday.

Bush's support pleased environmentalists, government officials and developer Syd Kitson.

The state money, along with \$40 million promised by Lee County, would meet the overall \$350 million price for the land.

Kitson, the West Palm Beach developer who has a contract to buy the 91,000-acre ranch from the Babcock family owners, plans to develop a city on the remaining 17,000 acres.

To make the deal work, Kitson needs the state to buy the land and state and local officials to sign off on his plans.

He said Bush's proposal was "terrific news."

"I tried not to think too much about what he might do," Kitson said. "I was really holding my breath until the budget came out."

Lee County Commissioner Bob Janes and other commissioners had urged state officials not to spread payments over three years as initially proposed.



Kitson
Babcock developer

"If they're going to buy it, they needed to go ahead and buy it," Janes said. "This is very good news."

About 10,000 acres of the ranch is in eastern Lee County; the rest is in eastern Charlotte County.

In his written recommendations, Bush said, "The protection of Babcock Ranch would preserve the single largest tract of contiguous land in the state's history and leave a natural legacy for future generation of Floridians."

In addition to wildlife habitat, the ranch provides valuable water resources for much of Southwest Florida.

If linked with other government-owned land, it would provide a virtual open corridor from Lake Okeechobee to the western Gulf Coast.

Rae Ann Wessell of the Babcock Preservation Partnership, a Lee County-based group formed to help buy the land, said the one-time payment is their preferred method.

"It eliminates the piece-meal purchase," she said. "Who knows what might have happened over three years? Buying it all at once is much better."

Groups including Florida Audubon and The Trust for Public Land also weighed in with support.

"We are very, very pleased with this," said Eric Draper of Florida Audubon in Tallahassee.

"We thought we'd have to fight through the Legislature over this, and we still may, but having it in the governor's recommendations makes it a lot easier."

It's still far from a done deal, Draper warned.

Some legislators resent having such a large chunk of money go to Southwest Florida, he said.

Another problem, he said, is what happened with the research institution known as the Scripps Institute. The Legislature agreed to spend money to help it relocate from California to Palm Beach County, but it has not been able to finalize the deal.

"It's a local project that got a big chunk of money and then had problems," Draper said. "Members don't forget that."

The good news is that Bush wants to buy Babcock with general revenue and not

dip into the Florida Forever fund used for preservation land buys.

Because Babcock won't take money from Florida Forever, Draper said, "it means more money there for projects elsewhere in the state, which should appeal to a lot of the members."

Bush was able to make the lump-sum proposal because the state will have an extra \$3.5 billion next year thanks to soaring property values.

Babcock Preservation's Wessell said concern still exists about the community for as many as 50,000 people that Kitson proposes to build.

Some Charlotte County officials also have had reservations about the development part of the deal.

They cite concern over water rights and who may be allowed to use water from the ranch.

Colleen Castille, secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection, which is handling the purchase, said her office is working to smooth those issues.

"This is a historic accomplishment for the state and that county," she said. "I really think they see the big picture here."

— Aaron Deslatte of The News-Press Tallahassee Bureau contributed to this report.