

# Seize the sunshine, save the environment

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## **OUR OPINION: Faltering economy can be good for the environment if leaders act smartly**

Look out, Florida lawmakers, four former governors are conducting a full-court press to convince you to resume funding the state's farsighted land-conservation program, Florida Forever. Legislators should heed the governors' call. Floridians need all the open space we can get.

Though Florida's population dipped slightly this year, 19 million people live here. That's projected to grow to 34 million by 2100. Will there be enough parks, open spaces and protected watersheds for so many?

The key to answering that question in the affirmative rests with today's state leaders. It's hard to take the long view when budget shortfalls are forcing everyone to tighten their belts, but courageous, visionary leadership is what's called for now.

In the deepest of sweeping cuts to environmental programs, Florida lawmakers plan to ax the state's premier land-buying program, Florida Forever.

The Legislature is moving to freeze the \$300 million annual land fund, which has preserved more than a half-million acres of ecologically sensitive lands across the state -- enough to cover a third of Everglades National Park.

They also aim to whack programs that mend injured manatees, clean up polluted waterways and build new gopher tortoise habitat to make amends for those buried alive under development.

South Florida is America's most vulnerable community to climate change. While Miami-Dade County, a pioneer and national leader, has made strides in addressing climate-change mitigation and adaptation, we now are moving toward a more resilient and sustainable future.

Miami-Dade County is developing a community-sustainability plan called GreenPrint to achieve aggressive energy- and greenhouse-gas reduction goals. This community plan, which does not know city or county boundaries, is being developed to reaffirm and synchronize our government and community goals, initiatives and measures. It will leverage existing sustainability goals and initiatives and develop new ones where needed.

In September, I convened the Mayor's Sustainability Advisory Board, a key component of the development and implementation of GreenPrint. It represents diversity with a mix of elected

officials, business and real-estate leaders, community designers, environmental and advocacy groups, academics, regional planners and the

Climate change is upon us and will challenge the people of South Florida in innumerable ways. At a dozen feet above sea level at most, the southern peninsula has been identified as one of the most vulnerable places on Earth to a rising sea.

Miami-Dade County recognized this threat early and joined an international community of local governments to come up with a plan to cut our carbon emissions. The county adopted its plan in 1995 and has been working ever since to try to reduce our carbon footprint back to 1988 levels.

Since then, the world community has embraced the science behind climate change, but unfortunately it has come too late to prevent the impacts. We now know that there's already so much carbon in the atmosphere that changes in our climate are inevitable. The oceans are swelling from melting glaciers and from the mere fact that water expands when heated.

South Florida's three largest counties have competed -- for jobs, conventions, sports teams, cruise ships, federal funds and many other things -- as much as they have cooperated over the years.

But Friday, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach, joined by Monroe, agreed that they share a large, looming problem they better start working on together fast: global warming, which brings with it the scary prospect of waves washing against abandoned beachside hotels before the century is up.

In the first regional summit on climate change, more than 200 political leaders, planners, water experts and environmental scientists from the four counties met in Fort Lauderdale. They kicked off what participants pledged would become a cooperative effort to address rising seas and temperatures that threaten to profoundly change the landscape and life from Key West to Palm Beach -- and the rest of the state as well.

While the economic slump has had a negative effect on almost every aspect of life in South Florida, it has given our natural world a breather. State and local leaders should take advantage of the hiatus in development to protect more of Florida's wild places and make Floridians' lives greener.

So far, they have gnashed their teeth over the lost property tax revenue from the tanked housing market and shown absolutely no inspiration in securing more undeveloped land to preserve for future generations. Instead, they should be making lemonade out of recessionary lemons.

For example, when the residential and commercial real-estate markets crashed, the push to move Miami-Dade County's Urban Development Boundary lost all credibility. Not that it had much to begin with, since the county's own planning staff found there's plenty of developable land east of the boundary. The Miami-Dade County Commission, however, stubbornly insists on encouraging proponents of UDB expansion to try yet again.

While new development is stalled, the Miami-Dade Commission -- and other local governments -- should stop bemoaning the drop in revenue and think more creatively. They can begin with a reexamination of their land use plans -- the blueprints for future growth. They should consider changes to the plans to promote sustainable development -- by conserving water, building up -- instead of out -- where practical, rewarding green projects and encouraging high-density redevelopment along transit corridors. These include the anticipated bullet train from Orlando to Miami and a proposed commuter train through coastal cities in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

The downturn also lowered the price of real estate, creating a big opportunity for state and local land conservation acquisition programs to buy tracts at fire-sale prices. The only problem is that the Legislature and Gov. Charlie Crist diverted the trust funds that pay for these programs in order to cover part of the state budget shortfall. State land purchases will come to a screeching halt in 2010 if these programs aren't refunded.

Legislators *must* restore funding to the land preservation trust funds. The money comes from a documentary stamp tax on real-estate transactions, which are picking up. To shirk this duty is to short-change Floridians' future quality of life.

Last year the state Senate approved a renewable-energy bill that would promote development of solar and wind power technology, but intense wrangling among major stakeholders made its passage in the House dicey. In the end, House leaders added a provision allowing oil and gas drilling off Florida's coast, and the measure appropriately died.

The Legislature should revisit renewable energy again this year. Florida is far behind other states, notably California, on developing renewable energy. It's the Sunshine State, after all, and it ought to be exploiting this by pushing for more solar power grids. There are federal stimulus dollars for states that craft viable renewable energy programs, and while Florida interests have received several grants, the state should compete for more.

As to oil drilling off our coast, House leaders are again pushing it -- a foolhardy policy. Florida stands to lose more than any other state if global warming trends aren't reversed soon. Our coastline will be one soggy mess as the oceans steadily rise. We can say goodbye to much of our tourism industry and coastal living as we know and enjoy it. Hurricanes and their tidal surges will be worse than ever. We should be at the forefront of the movement to wean the nation off using energy from fossil fuels, which produce carbon dioxide, the worst of the greenhouse gases.

On the bright side of Florida's environmental picture, in 2009 the Obama administration funneled a half-billion dollars toward Everglades cleanup. The result is several groundbreakings on long-stalled projects vital to the massive project. Gov. Crist spearheaded a drive to purchase 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. that will someday be converted into reservoirs and pollution treatment marshes.

The challenge now is to keep up the momentum between the cleanup's often contentious partners -- the state of Florida and the federal government.

