



## 10A » Opinion

# Team assembled for Florida Inland Port off to good start

Let's make a few things clear upfront. No, I have not been paid off or lobbied by potential developers of an inland port in southwestern St. Lucie County. My passion for the environment and maintaining the quality of life in the county is undiminished.

But, following a presentation on the possible creation of what is now called the Florida Inland Port, my mind is open to the possibility that the project's benefits might far outweigh the negative impacts. Analyses of infrastructure needs and funding, economic factors and effects on the environment may sway me toward opposition, but I'm willing to listen to what the developers are pitching until those details are revealed.

While the project is essentially the same that was pitched to Port St. Lucie which narrowly rejected the proposal, there have been some significant changes in the presentation as it was pitched last week during a meeting with the St. Lucie County Commission.

The project may have been oversold to Port St. Lucie by touting up to 36,000 potential jobs for what was then called the Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus. Skepticism about those numbers led to skepticism about the project overall. No projection of jobs was made during the presentation to



county commissioners.

Doubts were also raised as to whether the developers of the site — primarily local owners of agricultural land — had the expertise to pull off the kind of project proposed.

Assembled for the presentation last week was a dream team of representatives from real estate, port development, law and engineering with national and international experience and reputations. Leading the presentation was John Carver, executive vice president of Jones Lang LaSalle, the world's leading real estate services company, who had come in from Los Angeles to demonstrate the seriousness of the project and its potential. (Former NFL star Roger Staubach is an executive chairman of the company, not that it matters very much, though it's interesting.)

As being envisioned, the Florida Inland Port would be constructed on a 4,000-acre site in St. Lucie County and would serve all the deep-water ports in Florida from Jacksonville

to Miami. Cargo containers would be shipped by rail to the inland port for warehousing, distribution and parts assembly, if required. The products would then be shipped largely by truck to final destinations, primarily within Florida.

The need for an inland port in Florida is largely due to the anticipated demand for a central site away from the immediate port areas for cargo being shipped through the Panama Canal, which is being expanded to handle larger container cargo ships. The containers need to be moved quickly to make room for other incoming ships.

As I open my mind to the potential benefits, it's a little disconcerting to find myself possibly on the side of state Rep. Debbie Mayfield, R-Vero Beach, with whom I seldom agree.

Mayfield was present for last week's workshop and said, "It's not a matter of whether we're going to have an inland port in Florida, but where we're going to have an inland port in Florida." She said she will be working at the state level to see that an inland port is developed.

The Florida Inland Port could be expected to create thousands of jobs and thousands more spinoff jobs. Private investment would be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Carver said he doesn't anticipate funding for the project to be a significant issue, "We're talking to several parties about Florida and the inland port," he said. "There's plenty of capital out there from the private sector."

Based on the few comments and questions raised by commissioners during the meeting, it appears there may be general support among them for the project. But, it's still early in the process. Commission Chairman Chris Craft said he anticipates "many" public meetings with the developers before any decisions have been made. The developers have not yet even submitted a formal application for the project.

The developers seem to have learned some hard lessons from their failure to get approval for their project from the city of Port St. Lucie. If they hope to get approval from county commissioners, they are going to have to be open and complete in outlining details to the public on both the benefits and potential costs to the people of St. Lucie County.

They got off to a good start last week. But, the harder selling job lies ahead.

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