



Babcock awaits plant's fate

Written by

Brian Liberatore
bliberatore@news-press.com

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Crews could start laying roads next year for the world's first solar-powered city.

State planners have given the Babcock Ranch project a partial thumbs-up. A renewable energy bill working through Tallahassee marks the next crucial step toward the 45,000-resident city of the future.

Developer Syd Kitson and officials with Florida Power & Light are waiting for a vote from the state Legislature this session that would make possible a 75-megawatt solar panel power plant - among the largest of its kind in the world. The plant would power the city in the 91,000-acre Babcock Ranch property in Lee and Charlotte counties.

Moving forward

The state's Department of Community Affairs last year issued the first round of approvals, allowing the company to move ahead with designs and the first stages of construction.

"It is breathtaking, the process you need to go through and the cost of that process,"

Kitson said. "It has been challenging, but there has been a lot of great cooperation by a lot of agencies."

Kitson did not disclose the cost of planning beyond saying it was millions.

Construction on homes and commercial buildings was originally set to begin in 2010. That date has been pushed well into the future under pressure from the economy.

Engineers are designing the system of roads that will support 19,500 homes, 6 million square feet of commercial space, schools and public buildings. That process will take another 12 to 18 months, Kitson said. Building the infrastructure could take another year. Homes and commercial buildings would follow.

It would be the first smart city built from the ground up, Kitson said, exploiting cutting-edge technology to maximize energy efficiency and improve the quality of life.

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It's ambitious, but Kitson has the financial backing to pull it off, said Kitty Green, former Bonita Bay CEO and current CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Lee County.

"Clearly it's a long-term play. I think that Syd is an incredibly savvy developer," Green said. "He understands that it's a long-term play and he's got the financial wherewithal to stay with it. Ultimately the demographics are in his favor. I don't think anybody argues that there will be continued (immigration) to Florida."

Kitson said he plans to scale back the size and cost of the city's homes. But the project is pushing ahead.

In the meantime, Kitson's company early this year purchased the 450-acre Tuscan Reserve, a high-end golf course community in Naples.

Kitson & Partners in 2008 announced it had raised \$750 million from Evergreen Real Estate Partners, a Chicago-based private equity investor whose clients include public pension funds such as the Washington State Investment Board.

Ranch to rooftops

Kitson bought the entire 91,000-acre Babcock Ranch from its previous owners in 2006 for \$455 million. He sold back 74,000 acres to the state for \$351 million, about \$40 million of that from Lee, in the biggest preservation purchase in state history.

The land offers a link between Lake Okeechobee and the Gulf of Mexico, making it a key environmental property.

Concern over the community's impact on undeveloped land and Lee County roads sparked opposition to Kitson's vision from the start.

"I'm actually dreading this project," said local Sierra Club president Ellen Peterson. "We don't need 30,000 more people set up in the middle of a sensitive water-charge area. But it's done. They've accomplished it. When they get the money, it will get done."

Kitson said he has tried to accommodate the critics. The deal that launched the community protects 90 percent of the ranch. Traffic, Kitson said, will be kept down by designing a community that allows people to walk or use public transportation.

The state weighs in

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Kitson and FPL executives are watching Tallahassee closely.

"The state is on the cusp of being an energy leader or not being in the game at all," said Buck Martinez, a senior director with Florida Power and Light.

FPL needs an energy bill that would allow it to build a \$300 million array of photovoltaic cells on Babcock Ranch. That's not possible under current regulations, which require that energy providers use the least-expensive production methods. The new bill makes way for some exceptions.

This is the third shot at the bill in three years.

"There's a lot of talk from the energy sector about trying to diversify our energy sources," said freshman legislator Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-Fort Myers. "Especially in a state that has to ship in all of our resources. Those are commodities susceptible to price spikes, which has us concerned."

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