

St. Petersburg Times

Babcock Ranch to be first "solar city"

by Asjlynn Loder & Craig Pittman

April 9, 2009



Some of Florida's most pristine acreage will soon become home to one Florida developer's dream of a green city: nearly 20,000 homes, powered entirely by the world's largest solar photovoltaic array.

The solar-powered city, announced Thursday morning, will be built on Babcock Ranch, a 91,000-acre property that is home to panthers, black bears and wood storks. The state and Lee County paid \$350 million for 74,000 acres of cypress domes and pine forests in 2005. Five times the size of Manhattan, it remains the single largest conservation purchase in Florida history.

In exchange for selling the land to the state, developer Sydney Kitson got a green light to use the remaining 18,000 acres for an eco-friendly town that includes six million square feet of retail and non-residential space — equal to six malls — miles from the nearest city.

Kitson said Thursday that the development would also include small solar installations at homes and businesses, designed with the latest energy efficiency measures. He expects to start selling the homes some time in 2010, and begin construction in 2011.

Eric Silagy, who heads development for FPL, said construction on the 75-megawatt solar photovoltaic array will begin late this year or in the first quarter of 2010. Construction will take about a year, employ about 400 workers, and cost \$350 million to \$400 million. The cost will be borne by FPL's 4.5 million customers, at a cost of about 20 cents a month, Silagy said.

Florida Power & Light is the state's largest utility, and is a subsidiary of FPL Group, a world leaders in solar and wind energy. FPL Group subsidiary NextEra Energy Resources owns the world's largest solar power plant in California, a 310 megawatt solar thermal plant, which produces electricity by using the sun's heat to create steam that turns a turbine. The Babcock Ranch project, by contrast, will use photovoltaic panels with cells that convert sunlight into electricity.

Despite the hype, the city will rely on FPL's fossil fuel and nuclear power plants at night and when the sun isn't shining. The solar array and the city will be connected to FPL's power grid, and it's impossible to track a single kilowatt hour from its power source to the home that uses it.

More accurately, the development will use less power than the nearby solar array produces, making it a net exporter of solar electricity, Silagy said. So solar electricity will power the city when the sun shines, and send unneeded solar energy to other FPL customers. At night, the city will draw power from the utility's other power plants.

State and local officials tried for years to buy Babcock Ranch as the final link in a 65-mile-long corridor of preserved land from Lake Okeechobee to Charlotte Harbor that includes Fisheating Creek and the Babcock/Webb Wildlife Management Area. The ranch, particularly the part known

as Telegraph Swamp, is the largest parcel considered necessary to guarantee the \$10-billion Everglades restoration project works.

The purchase, straddling the border between Charlotte and Lee counties, was subsequently criticized by the state auditor general, who cited a document in state files that said Kitson's asking price for Babcock Ranch was \$117.2-million more than the initial appraised value in 2004.

Babcock Ranch, known among cattlemen as the Crescent B Ranch, was operated by the same family since 1918. Patriarch Fred Babcock was so proud of his stewardship of the land that he ran a side business called Babcock Wilderness Adventures so tourists could ride around the ranch and see what Florida used to look like. When he died in 1997, control of the ranch passed to more than 40 heirs, and they made it clear they were interested in selling to the right buyer.

<http://blogs.tampabay.com/energy/2009/04/babcock-ranch-to-be-first-solar-city.html>