

# OPINION

B10 | Local & State | \*\*\*

## BABCOCK RANCH

# Property can still be a gem

■ The sale of Babcock Ranch to developers is a blow to the hopes of preservationists, but much can still be accomplished to protect the land.

The sale of Babcock Ranch to a development partnership may end hopes for public ownership of the entire 91,000 acres, but much of the property can still provide great environmental and recreational benefits to the public.

That will now depend on what the new owners, Kitson & Partners of West Palm Beach, propose for the land, and how aggressive local leaders in Charlotte and Lee counties are in insisting on public benefits.

This is especially true if the new owners intend to add a major new development to the urban sprawl problems already afflicting the area.

If so, we also will need a strong commitment from state officials, who could have created a magnificent park had they succeeded in buying the ranch.

Local officials and activists, while discouraged at the news of the sale Thursday, were looking to make the best of the situation.

### VISION NEEDED

"I actually had the feeling that he was hoping that we may offer him a vision and that he could find a way to make it fit his needs as well," Charlotte County Commissioner Adam Cummings said after talking to Sydney Kitson, chairman and chief executive of Kitson & Partners. "He seemed to be eager to have a very inclusive process." Cummings has been a leader in the drive to save Babcock.

Babcock Preservation Partnership, a grass-roots group that has raised \$245,000 in cash and pledges to help buy the ranch and show the depth of public support, is still punching.

"Our mission is to support not just the acquisition but the preservation, conservation and management of the land," spokeswoman Liz Donley said in an e-mail to members. "I still think that the Babcock Preservation Partnership still has a role here."

### SEEK BALANCE

So do all citizens who care about this land, which shelters priceless resources, including water, wildlife and open space. It's still feasible to add most of Babcock to a corridor of preserves stretching from Lake Okeechobee to the coast, if advocacy is vocal enough.

The new owner has the right to develop the land. But the partnership is not automatically entitled to an increase in housing density, or to any particular level of profit on this heavy investment.

Kitson took the gamble of buying an expensive piece of property knowing full well that its preservation has wide public support. Development on the ranch will be a long drawn-out process, and

today's red-hot real estate market may cool.

That said, Sydney Kitson has indicated he appreciates the environmental value of the property.

People must continue to urge local and state officials to find the best possible compromise.

