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Heavy-duty developer champions Everglades



ROAD WORKS: Ronnie Bergeron, in front, with his son, J.R. Bergeron, at left, Mark Franklin, at rear, and Geoff Waite, at right, leaders of one of Ronnie Bergeron's divisions, visit a work site on the \$20.8 million project to widen the Sawgrass Expressway. Staff photo/Robert Duyos

Ronnie Bergeron has lofty goals despite having a few critics.

BY BUDDY NEVINS
POLITICAL WRITER

Developer Ronnie Bergeron grew up in a place where the only sounds were chirping and hissing and buzzing and the slap of his hand on the mosquito boring into his thigh.

The Everglades.

Dirt poor as a boy, he started with one \$200 tractor to earn money

mowing neighbors' pastures and fought his way to the top of Florida's business world.

He's become one of South Florida's biggest landowners, one of Florida's biggest road builders, and owner of one of the biggest mining companies in the state, with thousands of acres of rock pits. He's played a leading role in turning hundreds of square miles of wetlands into homes, schools, shopping centers and warehouses throughout Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Once hard-pressed to pay for new

clothes, today he buys jeans by the case and gives them away to friends after three washings. His belt buckles are silver, won in rodeo championships all over the country. His Rolex cost six figures and two of his fingers glitter with diamonds the size of cherry pits.

His fortune is hard to estimate because his 25 companies are privately owned, and he won't reveal his net worth. But people who have worked with him for years say it is well into the hundreds of millions.

Yet Bergeron has not forgotten the sawgrass wilderness where he

was raised.

He has now begun throwing his considerable wealth and political clout behind an effort to save animals in the Everglades when they are threatened by flood. His target is the complicated regulations and bureaucracy that govern how water flows through the state-owned Everglades, the Big Cypress Preserve to the southwest and the federal Everglades National Park to the south and southeast.

Bergeron sees no contradiction

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Developer champions wildlife

BERGERON

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between being a developer and a campaigner for the Everglades.

He said he only built on land set aside for development more than 50 years ago. And he has long involved himself with preservation efforts, fighting road building in the Big Cypress Preserve and promoting an end to the hunting of female deer in the River of Grass.

But his critics say Bergeron is trying to fix a problem he and his fellow developers created.

Rod Tirrell of the Sierra Club's Save the Everglades Committee said the Everglades did not flood before southwest Broward was developed. The rain then fell into the vast expanse of wetlands and seeped into the ground. Now, it's squeezed into much smaller wetlands and can't be absorbed as quickly.

"When that area [in southwest Broward] was filled in, where did they think the water would go? It has no place to go except the Everglades. Otherwise there would be three, four feet of water on everybody's lawns," Tirrell said.

The environmentalist said Bergeron's idea comes too late.

Said Tirrell: "It's just developer's talk."

'A HARD WORKER'

Before any tractors' hard steel blades bit into the muck, Bergeron sailed across the Everglades on an airboat with his grandfather, a game warden. He hunted deer and gigged frogs at night.

Home was Davie, a small farming village on the edge of the Everglades in the 1940s.

Every Friday and Saturday residents flocked to the rodeo.

Bergeron reveled in the rodeo and he continues, at age 59, to rope horses every week at the arena in Davie. When he was well into middle age, a rope wrapped around his finger and pinched the tip off during a competition.

"He was a hard worker, even as a boy," recalled Betty Osterhoudt, 82, his late first-grade teacher interviewed before her death earlier this month.

Dana Wallace, 78, his football coach at Stranahan High School, where Bergeron was the running back on the Gold Coast 1962 championship team, recalls Bergeron was one of the most disciplined players he ever knew. "I'd tell him to do 200 sit-ups and he'd do 500," he said.

There's also criticism.

"He has a take-no-prisoner approach to how he does business. It has annoyed a lot of people over the years," said George Platt, a Fort Lauderdale lawyer and lobbyist who both worked for Bergeron and represented people opposing his projects.

Cindy Osborne has run a hardware store in Davie for 54 years and remembers the young Bergeron.

"He was an egotistical little fellow," Osborne said. "He always needed to prove himself. So he's put his name all over everything."

Today there is the Bergeron park, Bergeron rodeo grounds, Bergeron Industrial Park, Bergeron rock pits, Bergeron Land Development and Bergeron in big black letters on graders, front end loaders and tractors building roads all over Florida, including a \$20.8 million widening of the Sawgrass Expressway now under way.

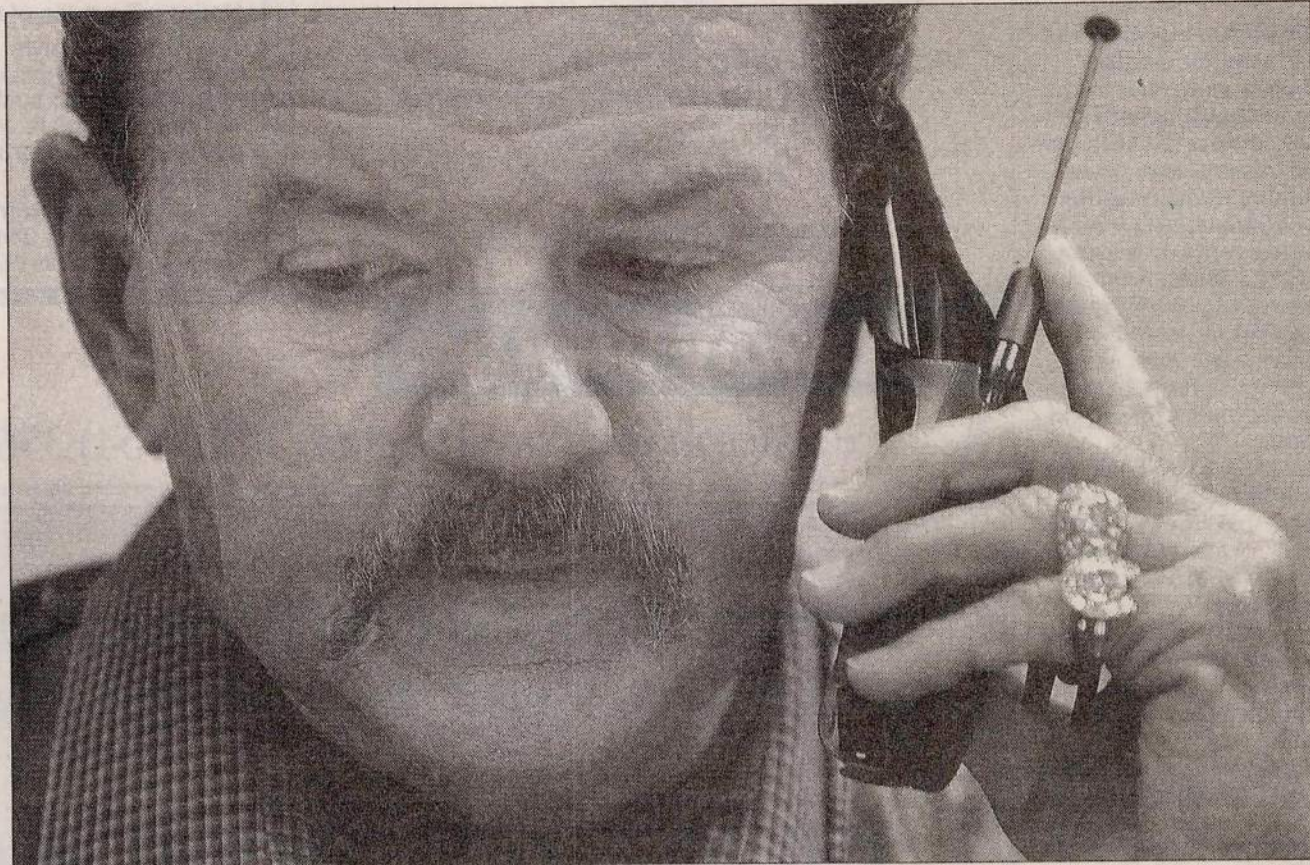
GREENER PASTURES

His parents' grocery store in Davie barely broke even. To help bring in some extra income, he began mowing the pasture of his Boy Scout leader as a teenager with a \$200 tractor. That soon blossomed into mowing several pastures.

"I quickly realized that all the people who were hiring me, all those successful farmers, owned land," Bergeron said. "That became my goal."

Bergeron was an unconventional budding land baron. He drank straight whiskey from the bottle, got into fistfights and rode his horse into bars, his friends say.

He also bought the Florida



ENVIRONMENTAL EFFORT: Ronnie Bergeron conducts business from his office in Pembroke Pines. To save animals, Bergeron wants the state to create a committee to improve how water flows through the Everglades, the Big Cypress Preserve and the Everglades National Park. Staff photos/Robert Duyos

swampland that was the subject of late-night comics' jokes. But he got the last laugh.

He negotiated one deal from atop an airboat resting on the wetland he wanted to buy. The seller wanted \$1,000 an acre for 340 acres, which Bergeron didn't have. "I promised him \$5,000 an acre over 20 years if I could put nothing down," he said. "He thought he took me."

Bergeron paid about \$1.7 million for that land three decades ago, turning it into a rockpit. He ended up digging 40 million tons of limestone out of it, which he sold for millions of dollars. The rock also enabled him to win tens of millions of dollars of construction projects for the road building business he launched.

Ten years ago, Bergeron used his political clout to get a zoning change that allowed home construction on the land. A developer paid him more than \$24 million for the property and the site development in 1995.

That former rockpit is now Keystone Lake, a 561-home gated development near Sheridan Street and Southwest 184th Avenue.

"I came out of Davie, a little country boy, a hick, a redneck. And I ended up making more than 100 times that \$5,000 an acre I paid," he said.

"He seems a little flaky with his blue jeans and cowboy clothes. But he's a tough, tough, hard-bargaining businessman who doesn't cut anybody any slack," said Kathy Cox, a former Davie city commissioner who was part of many negotiations with Bergeron.

Bergeron saved and scrimped, preferring to pour money back into land rather than into luxuries. He lived in a trailer on his property in Pembroke Pines well into his 40s and long after he made his first millions.

He was still in the trailer when the county started a landfill abutting his



COMPETITOR: Ronnie Bergeron goes through a practice ride before a calf roping event during a recent evening rodeo. Bergeron revels in the rodeo and, at age 59, ropes horses every week at the rodeo grounds in Davie.

property. He complained that the stench would prevent him from ever selling his land. The county offered him \$5 million in compensation.

He turned it down, asking instead that the county allow him to use his land for heavy industry.

"They thought I was nuts to turn that money down," Bergeron said.

But he was thinking ahead. He now has the only big stretches of land in southwest Broward open to industrial development, and companies eager to get a piece of it have flocked to his door. He's about to break ground once again, this time on a 120-acre expansion of his industrial park in Pembroke Pines.

By passing on the \$5 million, Bergeron said he will end up making hundreds of millions in land sales and rent, with money pouring in every month.

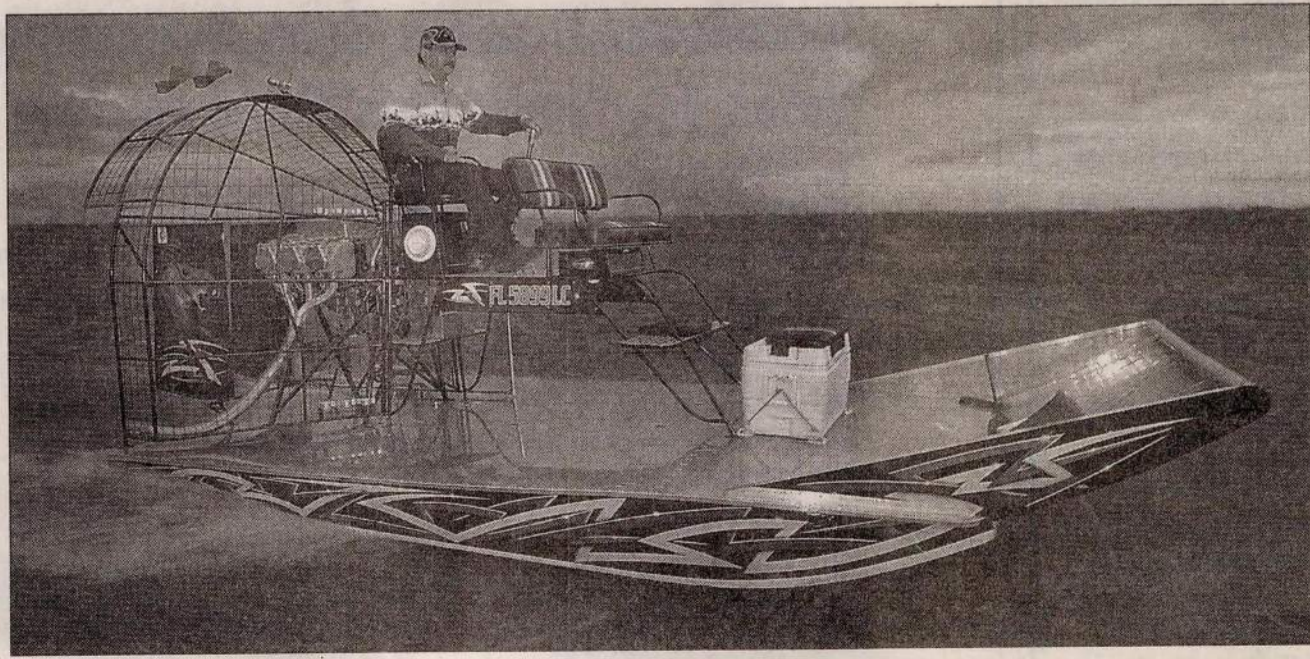
AT HOME IN THE 'GLADES

Each of Bergeron's three homes is surrounded by wetlands.

There is an 80-acre ranch in Weston and a 5,000-acre ranch abutting the Big Cypress Preserve in Hendry County. There is also a home on high ground in the Everglades built by his game warden grandfather in 1946, and remodeled by Bergeron, on land he leases under a state law that allows occupation of land used as camps before the preserve was created.

He often brings some of his six children, four girls and two boys ranging in age from 39 to 10, with him when he travels into the Everglades.

To preserve that land and the animals in it, Bergeron has proposed improving how water flow is controlled



RIVER OF GRASS: Ronnie Bergeron takes one of his airboats toward his camp in the Everglades.

NOTABLE PROJECTS

Developer Ron Bergeron controls 25 privately owned companies. His holdings include Bergeron Land Development, one of the biggest road contracting and site development businesses in Florida; Bergeron Sand Rock and Mining, which provides construction materials; and Bergeron Properties & Investments. He is responsible for:

■ Widening the southern end of the Sawgrass Expressway in Broward

County, currently under way.

■ Constructing the Palmetto Park and Northwest 22nd Avenue/Gateway Boulevard interchanges of Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County.

■ Constructing the Sawgrass Expressway, State Road 84 and I-95 interchanges of Interstate 595 in Broward County as part of a joint venture.

■ Constructing Storm Water Treatment Area 2, which was the first

Everglades restoration work and won a worldwide engineering award.

■ Mining 3,000 acres in Miami-Dade County and thousands more in Palm Beach County, Sumter and Broward counties.

■ Developing a large portion of Southwest Ranches in Broward.

■ Site work on thousands of acres for other developers.

■ Developing a 300-acre industrial park in Pembroke Pines.

■ Developing 1,000 acres of single-family housing in Pembroke Pines and Weston.

■ Selling Broward government 69 acres for a county jail in southwest Broward.

■ Donating the Bergeron Park on Nob Hill Road in Davie, a school site in Davie and paying for the Bergeron rodeo grounds in Davie.

■ Owning hundreds of thousands of square feet of shopping centers, storage centers and office buildings.

as it moves through the Everglades, the Big Cypress Preserve and the Everglades National Park and setting up a committee to police it. The concept is to have all three areas share both drought and floods equally.

In the past after big storms, the Everglades has been forced by federal courts and development patterns to hold too much high water to keep water levels lower in inhabited areas and to keep endangered species above water in the national park. In a 1994 flood, this policy drowned nine of every 10 deer, bobcats, mice, possums and raccoons in the Everglades outside the national park.

"I've built many of the canals in South Florida and I believe you can keep the water levels low enough in the Everglades during big storms to save the animals by channeling the water into the ocean and through the national park," he said.

His plan, he said, is compatible with the mammoth \$8 billion federal-state Everglades restoration initiative.

To persuade others to adopt his idea, he has printed thousands of copies of his proposal for distribution to the media and politicians in Florida and Washington, D.C. He displayed an exhibit in the state Capitol during the legislative session appealing for help, complete with pictures of animals killed by Everglades flooding.

Because he is Bergeron, and because he has political power, influential people are listening.

He held two campaign rallies for Gov. Jeb Bush at his Davie rodeo grounds. He held a fund-raiser for U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson last month that brought in \$25,000 from rockpit executives. No surprise then that Bush and Nelson both granted him 40-minute audiences.

He is scheduling meetings with leading environmental groups and the Native American tribal leaders. One of those he is working with is Henry Dean, director of the South Florida Water Management District, which has overall control over the water levels in the Everglades outside the national park.

"Ronnie should be thanked for bringing this issue to the forefront," Dean said.

But Dean added that getting the federal, state and local governments, plus the courts, the Everglades users and the environmentalists to agree on a way to handle water in a storm will be difficult.

Both Dean and Tirrell caution that federal court orders govern how much water can flow through the national park to save endangered species there such as the Cape Sable seaside sparrow.

"His idea is good, but the issue is complex," Dean said.

In the meantime, Dean said he has ordered his staff to study how they can save mammals in the Everglades threatened by flood.

"We will do what we can to help him," Dean said. "We have the same goal as he does — saving the wildlife in the Everglades."

Bergeron said his first step is to get Bush or the Legislature to establish what he calls an Everglades Water Committee. Such a committee would have appointees from the governor's office and include representatives of the national park and the Big Cypress Preserve, the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes, the South Florida Water Management District, the state game commission and a resident each from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties who has lived in the Everglades.

Nobody has committed to the plan yet, but Bergeron points out he's just getting started.

"We need all these groups to work together or we're going to have a massacre out there when the next hurricane comes," Bergeron said. "The wildlife is just coming back from the big flood 10 years ago, but I don't think it can take something like that again. I want the Everglades to remain full of life, for myself and for my grandchildren. For everyone's grandchildren."

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SOURCES: RON BERGERON AND PUBLIC RECORDS