

ACQUISITION OF CARTER LAND BRINGS QUESTIONS ABOUT USE

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A Wekiva River tract of nearly 10 square miles became this year one of the most expensive properties ever bought by the state for conservation.

The tract, formerly owned by developer Maury Carter of Orlando, hugs the Wekiva River for more than a mile and spans much of Black Water Creek. Some say the price tag of \$21.4 million was a bargain for the spring-fed rivers and rugged terrain preferred by black bears.

Now, hidden from the public that supported the acquisition, decisions are being made for the future of the tract, which is proposed to be called Seminole State Forest.

A handful of state officials will spell out when and where such groups as hunters, hikers, loggers and motorcycle riders will have their time on the tract.

"We are working on a management plan," said Jim Karels, a staff forester with the state Division of Forestry in Tallahassee. "It's preliminary to say what will be allowed."

Shortly after the state's Conservation and Recreation Land program, or CARL, bought Carter's property, his attorney said the tract was bound for abuse.

The state has allocated no extra money to manage or maintain the tract and, in general, land owned by the public isn't as well taken care of as land owned privately, said Duke Woodson, an Orlando attorney.

"It's all downhill" for the property, he said in May.

At the same time, others worry that management of the Maury Carter tract will be flawed from the start.

Fred Harden, president of The Friends of the Wekiva River, said management of state-owned tracts along the Wekiva has been sliced up along bureaucratic lines rather than ecological groupings.

The three major holdings along the river are the Seminole State Forest, the Lower Wekiva River Aquatic Preserve and the Rock Springs State Reserve. A forest, preserve and reserve have different management approaches.

Karels said the compatibility of the management plan for Seminole State Forest will be reviewed by other state agencies and Lake County planners before approval.

But apart from decisions on where to put trails or when to allow hunters, the Division of Forestry must make decisions for replanting trees - which will affect the forest's ecology for centuries.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for state forest officials will be the proposed Wekiva Park Estates. The development's tract of 1,100 acres would be covered with 177 homes on 5-acre lots and will be more or less in the middle of the forest.

The state was making its final offer to buy the tract last week.

"It's a good project in a terrible place at a terrible time," Harden said. "It would have a serious impact."

The Division of Forestry would have a difficult task, among others, in setting controlled burns near Wekiva Park Estates. Such burns are needed to mimic natural evolution of vegetation.

Karels said people can write or call the Leesburg office of the state Division of Forestry or present their views at a public hearing later this year or early next year.

The time and place of the hearing has not been set. The Division of Forestry doesn't expect to unlock Seminole State Forest until next year.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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