

FLORIDA WILL BUY WILDERNESS TRACT ON WEKIVA

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Florida officials have signed a deal to pay more than \$21.2 million for a tract of Wekiva River wilderness that tops the state's environmental protection list.

The 6,093 acres in Lake County are owned by developer Maury Carter of Orlando, who has negotiated for more than a year to sell the land to the state Conservation and Recreation Lands program, or CARL. Agreement on the price was reached Tuesday.

The tract covers rolling sandhills and wetlands along Black Water Creek and the Wekiva River. Environmentalists view the land, just north of State Road 46, as vital wildlife habitat and as a pristine buffer for spring-fed streams. Its purchase also would help link the Wekiva River with the Ocala National Forest to the north.

Carter bought the property in five pieces between 1981 and 1987. He began talks with CARL officials 13 months ago with an asking price of nearly \$24.4 million, or about \$4,000 an acre.

"We are not making money on it like we would expect to in the usual process of developing and selling land," Carter said Wednesday. "I had other buyers I could have negotiated with, but I meant it when I said I would sell it to the state."

The governor and Cabinet are expected to approve the contract next Thursday. Carter and CARL officials said the sale should be final by late April.

An unusual twist to the deal began late last year when CARL officials realized that the conservation program's \$40 million annual budget was rapidly being spent, leaving too little to buy Carter's property.

The St. Johns River Water Management District decided to step in. Early this month, its directors agreed to pay \$12.7 million to help buy the property.

Ed Kuester, bureau chief for the state Division of Land Acquisition, said the Carter purchase will leave CARL funds "pretty well tapped out" this year.

CARL will use next year's budget to buy the water district's share of ownership. In return for the help, the water district will retain some control over wetlands on the tract.

"It's magnificent property and another piece of the puzzle," said John Hankinson, director of the district's land acquisitions.

Last year, Carter filed applications with Lake County officials for approval of a subdivision development of more than 1,300 lots. Those applications remain in the preliminary stages.

Although the Lake County Commission this month tightened development restrictions along the river, Carter's request for approval fell under the previous guidelines allowing denser development.

Carter has been mining sand and fill dirt from the property for more than a year. The pit covers nearly 15 acres and he has permits to mine another 105 acres. But when the sale is final, mining will be stopped and the pit will be converted to a lake, Carter said.

State officials said the land will be managed as a preserve by the Florida Division of Forestry, the state Department of Natural Resources and the state Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

Carter's property fits in a mosaic of tracts west of the Wekiva River that the state gives its highest priority for purchase. The tracts total some 15,000 acres and have dozens of owners. Two years ago, Gov. Bob Martinez canoed on the Wekiva River and declared his support for its protection.

Later, several Wekiva River parcels were boosted to the top of the CARL priority list of 60 sites. But CARL negotiators were unable to buy any of the Wekiva parcels. The state also may have lost out in efforts to buy 5,600 acres of the 15,000 acres owned by Ted Strawn of DeLand, who has an agreement to sell his land in Lake County to a developer.

The ice finally was broken when CARL revealed a deal last fall to buy 3,335 acres south of Carter's property for \$12.5 million, but that deal remains complicated by disputes over the number of acres involved.

Carter and other landowners have criticized CARL for having a snail's pace in negotiating deals. Duke Woodson, an Orlando attorney representing Carter, said recently that interest costs for the property are about \$5,000 a day.

"A year ago, the price of the land would have been about \$2 million less," he said.

Fred Harden, president of the Friends of the Wekiva River, said the purchase of Carter's land is a good start. "It's a critical piece . . . tied to a whole system of wetlands and uplands."

[Illustration]

MAP: Land to be sold to state Carter property SENTINEL GRAPHIC

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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