

Property may provide a haven for gopher tortoises

By Rene Stutzman

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

KISSIMMEE — Unfortunately for gopher tortoises, when it comes to land, they often have the same taste as developers. Both prefer sandy uplands.

However, in Tallahassee Thursday, the tortoises won a victory that not only gives them the high ground but also makes developers pay for it.

A state board tentatively offered Osceola and Orange counties \$5 million to buy and preserve Split Oak Forest, 1,845 acres of prime development land thick with gopher tortoises.

The property is home to hundreds of gopher tortoises and four other protected upland species, said Mike Allen of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

The commission, which protects endangered and threatened species in Florida, plans to preserve the land to offset the loss of gopher tortoise habitat elsewhere.

Technically, the property, which straddles the Orange-Osceola county line, would be paid for, over time, by developers.

Those who destroy gopher tortoise habitat while developing a piece of property elsewhere would be allowed to compensate for the loss by contributing to the park, which fronts Lake Hart and adjoins Moss Park in eastern Orange and Osceola.

Eventually, the state's \$5 million would be paid back. So would the \$2.3 million Orange County has committed to the project.

"The property has huge oak trees around Lake Hart and other areas," said owner Maury L. Carter, an Orlando developer-rancher. "Most of the land is left in its natural state. . . . My unbiased opinion says it's the prettiest property in Orange County."

Carter has drawn plans to develop the property into a housing subdivision, but he has said he would be willing to sell it to the counties.

On Thursday, he said he would sell the land for \$11 million, far more than the \$7.3 million committed to the project by the counties and state.

Florida Community Trust, part of the Florida Department of Community Affairs, on Thursday ranked Split Oak as No. 6 on its list of projects to be funded this year.

A final funding decision is expected in June, said Anne Peery, executive director of the trust. Allen said Thursday's decision made state backing "90 percent definite today."

The counties would buy the property, with Osceola County using \$2.7 million from the trust and Orange County another \$2.3 million from the trust, plus \$2.3 million of its own.

The counties would own the park land that falls in their jurisdictions — 1,160 acres for Orange County and 685 in Osceola — and the Game Commission would manage it.

Animals in the forest

Split Oak Forest, a 1,845-acre tract that straddles the Orange-Osceola county line, is home to five protected upland species, most noteworthy the gopher tortoise.

Osceola and Orange counties want to buy and preserve the property, worth an estimated \$7.5 million to \$10 million. That eventually would be repaid by developers required to compensate for gopher tortoise habitat they have destroyed elsewhere.

Florida Communities Trust, a state board that doles out money to preserve land, Thursday placed Split Oak high on its short list of projects. A final decision is expected in June.

