

# A CROP OF DEVELOPMENTS

*Farmland is disappearing as commercial projects sprout up*

By Jerry Jackson

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

**A** Target department store recently broke ground in a former cow pasture owned by A. Duda and Sons Inc. in south Seminole County.

In west Orange County, a dry, sunbaked parcel of vacant citrus land is being prepared for planting of a lush, golf-course complex.

The projects are early signs that thousands of acres of fallow farmland in Central Florida may be poised for renewed interest in commercial development.

Construction of homes, offices and shopping centers in the 1970s and '80s ate away at the region's citrus groves, dairy farms and cattle ranches. Orange County, for example, lost more than 36 percent of its farmland and 45 percent of its harvested cropland from 1978 to 1987.

A string of freezes helped speed the process by devastating hundreds of thousands of acres of citrus.

But a sluggish economy during the past several years slowed the pace of farmland conversion, with property sales few and far between.

"The market has been slow since the 1989 freeze, but the past two years have really been slow," said Larry McCrainie, a veteran broker who specializes in agriculture land sales for Tucker & Branham Inc., a real estate company in Orlando.

"There's quite an inventory out there" of farmland and former farmland for sale, McCrainie said. "I think we'll have to see some of it dwindle down before you'll see much movement."

In addition to the economic slump, tighter land-use restrictions have placed barriers to both development and agricultural use of land.

A survey conducted in the spring and released recently by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences showed that, for the third consecutive year, citrus-grove prices fell statewide.

The decline in 1993 ranged from 9 percent to more than 18 percent, depending on location and other factors. Central Florida land with mature, fruit-bearing orange trees took one of the worst hits, falling an average of 14.2 percent to \$8,796 an acre.

The drop in farmland values also has been blamed in part on slumping fruit prices. A bumper crop of oranges in the 1992-1993 season, which ended in July, caused citrus revenue statewide to fall 43 percent from the previous season.

More water-use restrictions and lingering fears of freezes also have tempered citrus replanting, helping to hold down land prices, said John Jackson, citrus specialist with the Florida Cooperative Extension Service for Orange and Lake counties.

"All the factors have been negative," Jackson said. "But these things run in cycles."

Citrus fruit prices have begun rebounding from depressed levels in early 1993, he said, making it more likely that at least some replanting will occur and that existing groves may remain in agriculture.

Many economists also think that more robust growth in the economy is overdue, and it will be fueled by low interest rates and pent-up demand.

Jackson said that, while a wastewater reclamation project in west Orange County is helping to preserve a small swath of citrus acreage by providing irrigation as well as cold-weather protection, a proposed golf course on the property could speed up the loss of citrus in the region.

"You've got high, well-drained land. There's going to be a desire to develop out there, once the golf course is in," Jackson said. "It's going to be hard to deny that."

The sprawling golf-course complex is proposed for more than 500 acres owned jointly by Orlando and Orange County. Preliminary plans call for private development of two 18-hole courses, a nine-hole course, an instruction area and putting greens.

The former citrus land is in the Conserv II irrigation site, where treated wastewater from Orlando and Orange County sewage plants is recycled. The golf course would consume about 5 million gallons of reclaimed water daily for irrigation.

Orange County's growth management plan will prevent runaway development in the area, even after the golf course is built, said Conserv II project manager Phil Cross.

The rural region is restricted to a density of no more than one home on 10 acres of land.

But Conserv II has plans to expand its pipes and distribution area farther north, toward Winter Garden, later this year, Cross said, with hopes of serv-

## Lost cropland

### Remaining acres

|          |        |
|----------|--------|
| Lake     | 49,258 |
| Seminole | 5,104  |
| Volusia  | 5,354  |
| Orange   | 40,321 |
| Brevard  | 15,045 |
| Osceola  | 32,501 |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau



ing residential customers as well as agriculture. Reclaimed sewage is currently sprayed on about 4,000 acres of citrus.

A countywide water reuse ordinance that is being developed would allow the project to serve homes and apartments.

A number of landowners in west Orange have been working to get the county to reconsider the area's rural designation, but so far without success. Plans for the golf course give them renewed hope that higher-density development will be allowed.

"We want our property rights back," said Lester Austin III, a former citrus grower in the area.

## DEALS IN THE WORKS

Maury L. Carter & Associates Inc., an Orlando property acquisition and management company, has been one of the biggest buyers of Central Florida farmland for potential development.

While most of the acquisitions are for "long-term holds," development on some of the land may begin within a few years, said Maury Carter, president.

Carter bought the 10,084-acre Triple E ranch in Osceola County a few years ago and now has an application for a state Development of Regional Impact to rezone it for a development density of one home to about an acre.

The western half of the property is in the DRI zone and calls for 4,824 homes, while the remainder would stay in open land and agriculture for future development.

"It's too large a bite for one time," Carter said. Commercial development would encompass 53 acres, with an estimated 520,000 square feet of space. Another 38 acres would be in offices, with 385,000 square feet of space.

Property for a school and library as well as parks and recreation also would be set aside.

Development of the eastern side is probably 20 years to 30 years down the road, Carter said.

Last year, Carter acquired 5,766 acres of agricultural land southeast of Orlando International Airport and adjoining the Lake Nona mixed-use development. A DRI study is being sought to allow about a third of it to be developed.

The project would comprise 3,391 single-family homes, 1,758 apartment units and 751,300 square feet of commercial space. In addition, there would be 667,400 square feet of business park space. Two hotel sites, including 1,000 rooms, also are planned at the site, at State Road 15 and the Central Florida GreeneWay.

"We have several thousand feet of frontage on Lake Hart, adjoining the Lake Nona property," Carter said.

Carter also bought 1,267 acres of former citrus land from the Chester Fosgate company in Lake County. The land, which was recently annexed into Clermont, is zoned for four homes an acre and commercial development.

"We expect to see some activity there on that property within the next few years," Carter said.

The development DRI calls for 3,975 residential units, from low density to high density. Thirty-eight acres is set aside for professional offices, while 85 acres would be for other commercial use.

Community recreation and public-use areas would account for 34 acres. A golf course on 157 acres also is planned. Another 204 acres would be open space.

Forty acres is being donated to Lake Sumter Community College for construction of a south Lake County campus, Carter said, and 10 acres is being given to the YMCA for a wellness center and recreation complex.

## PROJECTS CAN TAKE YEARS

Development of Duda's former farm property in south Seminole County provides a lesson in just how long it can take to move a project from the drawing boards to groundbreaking.

Preliminary development plans for the more than 500 acres began nearly a decade ago, and they were revised a number of times as state and local permitting processes were under way.

The property straddles Red Bug Lake Road, which was recently rerouted and widened to provide better access to the former farming region. The project, called Oviedo Crossing, has set aside 167 acres for woodland preservation.

The Target store that's under construction won't stand alone. Additional commercial growth is expected as a result of the extension of the Central Florida GreeneWay, which is scheduled to open on the east side of the property early next year, said Tom Morgan, a Duda spokesman.

"Several restaurants are looking at it, and a major health-care provider is looking to build an outpatient clinic — not a full-blown hospital, but multiple build-

ings," Morgan said.

Although it took years to obtain government permits, including a DRI, the slow economy was to blame for stalling the project for the past several years, Morgan said. The company hopes the worst of the slump is over.

Duda also is developing about 3,200 acres of a 38,000-acre tract that was a cattle ranch in Brevard County. An 18-hole golf course is near completion at the vast, mixed-used development — known as Viera — and homes are going up where cows once grazed.

The first phase will include 3,762 single-family homes, more than 2,700 multifamily units, 1.9 million square feet of office space, 52 acres for parks and recreation and 282 acres of preservation land.

The project is expected to take decades to complete and eventually become home to about 50,000 people.



RED HUBER/SENTINEL

Maury Carter displays plans on pasture land owned by Maury L. Carter & Associates.