

COUNTY JOINS TEAM IN LAND PRESERVATION OSCEOLA HAS JOINED ORANGE - AND 5 STATE AGENCIES - TO BUY ACRES FOR CONSERVATION IN THE SPLIT OAK PROJECT.

[CENTRAL FLORIDA Edition]

Orlando Sentinel - Orlando, Fla.

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Date: Feb 16, 1994

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Section: OSCEOLA SENTINEL

Text Word Count: 555

Document Text

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An unprecedented effort to buy more than 1,800 acres in Osceola and Orange counties for preservation has won the approval of both county governments this week.

Osceola County commissioners unanimously approved their part of the \$8.6 million land deal on Monday. And Orange County commissioners signed off on the agreement, known as Split Oak, on Tuesday.

The land, owned by developer and longtime businessman Maury Carter, is along the east side of State Road 15 and includes scenic views of Lake Ajay in Osceola and Lake Hart in Orange.

The deal, which now goes to The Florida Communities Trust in Tallahassee for approval on March 4, will ensure that the land will be saved from development and used as a land bank, county officials said.

"We're pleased to do this sort of thing," said Osceola County Commission Chairman Charles Owen. "It's a beautiful piece of property."

It is the first time two counties have joined the state in establishing such a conservation project that could serve as a model statewide.

Proponents say the deal also is unique because of the coordination required by two county governments and five state agencies: the Florida Trust, East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, the state Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the South Florida Water Management District.

Altogether, the Split Oak property includes about 1,160 acres in southeast Orange and about 685 acres in northeast Osceola - a large habitat for scrub jays, fox squirrels, gopher tortoises and sandhill cranes.

But the advantages of preservation aren't the only benefits to the deal, proponents say.

County officials say the money they spend buying the land eventually will be repaid piecemeal by developers looking for preservation land. They'll use it to offset environmental damage caused by construction of their projects elsewhere.

"We're committed to the payments, but these revenues would come back to us from developers," Osceola Commissioner Jim Swan said. "Virtually every developer has some kind of mitigation they need to do. I really don't think we're going to have a problem selling it off."

Under the agreement, the counties will pay the upfront costs of buying the land. Osceola will put up about \$414,000, about \$83,000 in annual payments over the next five years.

Orange County will pay about \$3 million, all of which will come from a \$25 million environmental lands bond issue that is backed by utility taxes.

In addition, Osceola and Orange will jointly borrow another \$2.7 million from the Florida Trust, a state agency that helps local governments with conservation and recreation projects.

The Florida Trust also has agreed to chip in \$2.3 million toward the purchase price. Finally, the state Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission is to contribute \$175,000 and take care of the property, records show.

For Osceola's part, the deal signifies the county's first attempt to buy land for such purposes.

"I would rather see us preserve a large tract, instead of trying to protect a tiny postage stamp," Swan said.

For Orange, the project marks the first large-scale effort, especially because it adjoins 1,550-acre Moss Park.

"The bottom line is that we don't put any money in the deal," said Osceola County Manager Bill Goaziou. "And that's good for all of us."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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