

2 counties OK deal to save land

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

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

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 March 4, will ensure that the land will be saved from development and used as a land bank, county officials said.

Here is how the land bank would work: When a developer wants to destroy 4 acres of wetlands to build a new subdivision in south Orange, he could pay to permanently preserve 16 acres at Split Oak.

State wildlife officials will use the same banking philosophy with the park to compensate for developers who destroy endangered gopher tortoise habitats.

"We're very happy to get this together," said Sherry Williams-Hooper, Orange County's environmental lands acquisition official.

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.

Split Oak 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.

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

Orange County will pay about \$3.17 million from a \$25 million environmental lands bond issue backed by utility taxes.

Osceola and Orange also will jointly borrow an additional \$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. The game and fish commission is to contribute \$175,000 and take care of the property.