

Chunk of woods to become a park

□ The commission agreed to spend \$5.07 million on wildlife habitat in east Orange County.

By Mike Oliver

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

More than 1,100 acres of prime wildlife habitat in east Orange County was snapped

up for public preservation Tuesday.

The Orange County Commission cleared the way for closing on a \$5.07 million purchase of the land north of State Road 50 about a half-mile from Fort Christmas Park.

"It is a huge, beautiful piece of property that Orange County will now be able to lock up and enjoy for generations," said George Hart, manager of the county's real-estate management division.

It is the latest and largest land purchase

on the way to fulfilling a pledge of county Chairman Mel Martinez to spend \$10 million on land for parks and preservation.

The land is primarily pine woods but also includes pasture land, scrub oaks and about 200 acres of wetlands.

Potential public uses for the property include fishing, hiking, biking, horseback riding, camping, hunting and tree farming.

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County worked out lower price for land

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The purchase also is beneficial to the area's water supply, county officials say. Because it's mostly high and dry land, it serves as a significant water-recharge area — one that allows rainwater to filter back into the aquifer. This is especially important in this area, water officials

say, because that section of the county is filled with wetlands and poorly drained soils, which don't replenish the aquifer.

The county received two appraisals for the 1,126.7 acres — one for \$5.5 million and the other for \$5.07 million. Officials negotiated a deal with property owner Maury Carter for the lower price provided the deal closes before

the end of the year, Hart said.

With the commission's approval Tuesday, the closing should occur within the next 30 days, Hart said.

The approval Tuesday follows the approval last month to buy about 450 acres in the Econ Basin south of S.R. 50 and a few miles west of the recent purchase.