

Remote ranch touted as Econ River buffer

Preservationists are among those who want Orange to commit \$5 million toward buying the land.

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Orange County commissioners will make a series of critical decisions this week on how much money to put toward everything from the county's troubled jail system to after-school programs and health care for the uninsured.

And in the middle of their three-day budget work session — on Wednesday morning — they'll hear a sales pitch on why the county should commit \$5 million to buy a ranch in the middle of nowhere.

Few residents have seen the 5,200-acre Holland Ranch, once used by Lockheed Martin to test laser systems and later abandoned to deer, sandhill cranes, red-cockaded woodpeckers

and other wildlife, but the remote and relatively untouched condition of the property at the boundary of southeast Orange and Osceola counties is a big part of its appeal.

The ranch contains much of the swampy headwaters of the Econlockhatchee River, which winds north for 36 miles through Orange and Seminole counties before emptying into the St. Johns River. With development closing in all along the fragile waterway, there's little land left to create the natural buffers scientists say are vital to its health and to control flooding.

'A golden opportunity'

"This is a golden opportunity," said Clarence Hoenstine, the district commissioner who has been pushing the purchase.

Last summer, commissioners backed the idea of creating a partnership to acquire the property, which the Holland family calls TM Ranch. The county would pay \$1 million a year for five years, with the state or other partners kicking in the rest to meet the es-

timated price of \$15 million.

But finding partners hasn't been easy. The county nearly reached a deal with the St. Johns River Water Management District, but the agency was counting on state funding from the Florida Forever land-buying program. This spring, negotiations on the purchase abruptly ended when the district learned the ranch didn't make the cut for Florida Forever this year.

Hoenstine has since been searching for an alternative. Residents, too, have been lobbying hard for the purchase, with the price now down to \$14.5 million.

"My interest is in preserving what's left of Florida," said Rebecca Eagan, a Winter Park resident who has been exchanging e-mail with Gov. Jeb Bush for two months, urging him to get behind the purchase. "That seems to be a particularly important ecosystem and filter for the river."

Scientists favor preservation

Scientists agree that it's critical to protect the ranch from development.

As the birthplace of the river, its wetlands filter pollutants and serve as a massive storage pond to guard against flooding in downstream suburbs during heavy rain.

The land also contains a mosaic of habitat supporting rare plants and animals, from cypress swamp and open marshes to pine flatwoods and scrub.

"Anyone will tell you the headwaters of any river system is very important because it affects what's down below," said Walter K. Taylor, a biology professor at the University of Central Florida who uses the river as an outdoor laboratory for his students. "The Econ is a jewel of a river, and it should stay that way."

For years, the Holland property was so far from any city that developers had no interest in it. But in the past two years, southeast Orange has become the region's new hot spot. A few miles west of the ranch, hotels, offices and several thousand homes are to be built around Campus Crusade's new headquarters at Lake Hart.

Maury Carter, the broker trying to

sell the ranch, says a potential developer has been eyeing the property, most likely for a golf-course community.

"They're very serious about it," he said.

"If the county and state don't buy it, I expect it will be sold very soon to the investor group."

Several options to consider

In Wednesday's 10:30 a.m. budget session, county staffers will outline all of the options for buying the ranch. Hoenstine said he hopes to find a solution before developers try to buy the land.

But he'll need to convince other commissioners that he can.

"The bottom line is, I've got to buy some time," he said.

"We're doing the best we can to try to get this property, and I'm not going to give up."

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