

GROUP ANXIOUS TO MOVE AHEAD 'STATUS REPORT' ON WEKIVA TALKS SOUGHT

[LAKE Edition]

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Negotiations by the state to buy a large tract of environmentally sensitive Lake County land near the Wekiva River may begin to heat up as events unfold. In an effort to show the state that Lake County is still interested in preserving its environmentally sensitive lands, several Lake County citizens are traveling to Tallahassee this week to speak to Estus Whitfield, the governor's environmental adviser.

"Here we are almost a year later and I would like to get a status report," Lloyd said. Lloyd helped organize a bus trip last year to lobby for a higher ranking for Seminole Springs on the state's shopping list for environmentally sensitive lands.

Shortly after Lloyd presented the Department of Natural Resources Land Acquisition Committee with a petition bearing more than 2,000 names, the land was moved from 20th to fifth on the list. Later, the parcel was moved to number one.

Lloyd, chairman of the conservation advisory committee to the Lake County Water Authority, said, "I think we definitely have to move ahead."

One factor thrown into the steamy mix of land speculation in eastern Lake County is the question of whether a large development proposed for the Wekiva River will be successful in gaining approval.

Wekiva Falls, a 2,800-unit housing development, is proposed for about 1,800 acres, including about 1,450 acres in Lake County south of State Road 46.

The project is currently undergoing a review by the Lake County planning staff. The staff will make a recommendation to the Planning and Zoning Board, which will in turn make a recommendation to the county commission. The commission will then give thumbs up or down.

Some local and state officials believe negotiations between the state and landowners in eastern Lake County have been temporarily stymied while everyone waits to see what happens if the county gives approval to Wekiva Falls.

Landowners in the area are playing their cards close to the vest.

Maury Carter and Associates Inc. which owns 6,088 acres north of State Road 46 in the Wekiva River area, recently told the state they would be interested in having their land placed on the CARL acquisition list along with the adjacent Seminole Springs.

The CARL selection committee added them to the list, bringing the Seminole Springs parcel up to a total of 13,500 acres. The Carter property addition to Seminole Springs still needs to be approved by the governor and cabinet in February.

But Maury Carter and Associates have not ruled out development.

"This is agriculturally zoned property that was looked at as a long-term investment," said Daryl Carter, a broker with the company. "We have no development plans at the time and have basically kept an open mind about what is the highest and best use of the property. We would prefer to sell it to the state."

Theodore Strawn owns the largest tract of the Seminole Springs land, some 5,600 acres, and he, too, has indicated he would prefer to sell to the state. But so far, he has turned down state offers.

Strawn's wife said Tuesday that "there is too much involved right now to discuss" the negotiations.

"My husband is 84 and we would like to get this thing settled," she said. Greg Brock, environmental supervisor with the Department of Natural Resources Division of State Lands, said the state is actively pursuing the acquisition from Strawn, but "apparently they are not too pleased with our offering price. Our problem is that we can't go any higher."

Strawn has said in past interviews that he believes his land is worth more than \$10 million.

Brock will not say what the state has offered, but he said the state can offer only an average of two certified appraisals. The Nature Conservancy, a private group that often works with the state to buy sensitive land, is still working to sweeten the pot, Brock said.

In addition to the Strawn and Carter land, there are 31 other property owners who own the parcel that the state calls the Seminole Springs/Seminole Woods parcel. Another parcel, a 5,800-acre tract called BMK Ranch, located south of State Road 46 and east of Mount Plymouth, is sixth on the state's CARL list.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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