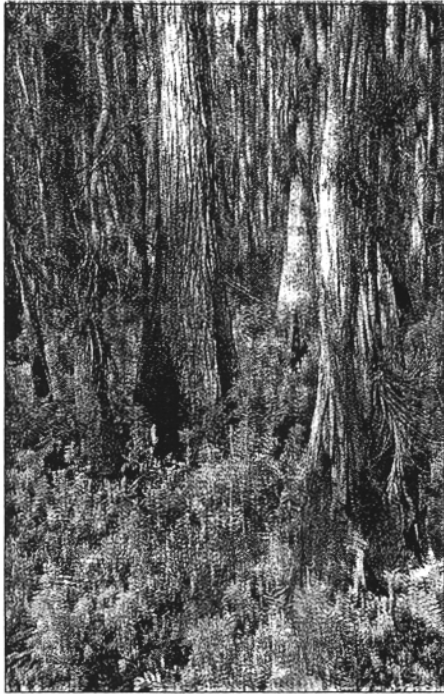


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PHOTOS BY GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO-SENTINEL

Holland Ranch. Wildlife abounds on the 5,200-acre property in southeast Orange County, slated to be a nature preserve.



Wetlands. Stands of cypress trees on the Holland Ranch property mark the course of the fragile Econlockhatchee River. A vote is scheduled Wednesday on the land deal.

Despite key efforts, county lags on cash for environment

By **CHRISTINE SHENOT**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Rebecca Eagan has never seen the Holland Ranch in southeast Orange County, and it's nowhere near her Winter Park home. But that didn't make her any less frantic about saving it when she learned that the 5,200-acre stretch of pine flatwoods, scrub and swamp was for sale.

For months, she e-mailed state officials, including Gov. Jeb Bush, urging them to help the county buy the property. She grew up here and knew how the story might end: golf courses, condos and convenience stores, all scattered around the headwaters of the fragile Econlockhatchee River.

"They're just ripping down

woods right and left," she said of growth near the ranch. "When you are a native and see the change, you can't help but just get outraged."

In the end, the state didn't offer any money for the purchase. Instead, a \$7.5 million deal was struck during heated, last-minute negotiations between the county, the St. Johns River Water Management District and the landowner. The ranch is to become a nature preserve.

A vote by the water management board, set for Wednesday, is the final hurdle to ensuring that the land is never bulldozed and paved.

But even if the ranch is

PLEASE SEE **GREEN, B4**

saved, the picture for many other natural areas is bleak.

Metro Orlando is growing faster than any other big city in Florida, adding 800 residents a week, but it ranks near the bottom in dedicated funding for parks and preserves.

Lean on green

At a time when people across the country are agreeing to pay higher taxes to protect dwindling green space, Orange County has no such program. Officials here have to draw from the same pot of money that covers countless other needs.

Eagan blamed the preponderance of newcomers who know little about natural Florida. "I don't think enough citizens care about it."

Indeed, the Holland purchase got little public attention. Yet it was one of the most critical ever weighed by the county. The property's cypress swamps, wet prairies and marshes provide more than wildlife habitat.

They serve as a huge storage basin for the Econ during wet periods, protecting thousands of downstream residents from flooding.

But in tough economic times, buying the ranch was no easy decision.

In 1995, Orange County issued bonds worth \$37.9 million to buy environmentally sensitive land.

Voters in the 1980s had twice rejected new taxes for land acquisitions and parks, so the county used its existing authority to back the bonds with taxes charged on electricity and other utilities.

It made several key purchases in the 1990s, protecting thousands of acres, mostly near the Econ.

Going, gone? Environmentalists fear loss of woodlands will diminish the state's natural character and endanger its water system.

Competing for cash

However, that money was just about gone when the Holland purchase came up, so the ranch had to compete for cash against everything from preschool and health facilities to computer systems and sheriff's substations.

Lake and Osceola counties face the same challenge, but they have even less money in their tiny budgets to spare for parks and open space.

"You do what you can," said Rod Schultz, who as Osceola's environmental manager spends a lot of time scouting potential partners to help the county stretch its scarce dollars.

Schultz thinks a well-run campaign might persuade residents to back a land-buying program. So does Clay Henderson, a local attorney who specializes in conservation purchases.

"Orlando has such a bad reputation for opposing anything related to a tax," Henderson said.

"But I will tell you this is absolutely the most popular cause out there. It has proven vote-getting ability not only in Florida, but nationwide."

A priority elsewhere

Consider the recent track record.

Voters across the United States have passed hundreds of referendums since 1998, backing \$19 billion in new spending to save pockets of green in cities, suburbs and rural areas. Even last year, with few major elections, voters turned out to approve \$1.7 billion worth of purchases, according to the Trust for Public Land, a land preservation group.

In Florida, where rampant

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growth has been a fact of life for decades, many local communities — including the four largest counties — have shown strong support for these programs, with voters embracing local spending of more than \$1 billion since 1990.

In most cases, funding came from property-tax increases translating to as little as \$20 a year for the average homeowner.

Broward County has the biggest program, by far. Voters there backed a property tax increase in 2000 to raise \$400 million, of which \$230 million is targeted at buying land and the remainder at improving county parks.

In the same year, voters in Jacksonville agreed to a half-penny sales tax increase, boosting local spending on green space to \$71 million.

Volusia residents backed a property tax increase that will yield up to \$80 million for parks, preserves and historical sites.

And in Seminole, voters agreed to extend the county's \$20 million natural lands program with a bond referendum

authorizing another \$25 million for trails and land acquisitions.

Two other major votes for preservation — \$150 million in Palm Beach County and \$50 million in Sarasota County — won support in 1999.

In Brevard and Polk counties, voters in earlier years backed bonding up to \$55 million and \$20 million, respectively.

Orange County Chairman Rich Crotty said he aims to continue the county's efforts to protect sensitive land, particularly where water resources are a stake.

But he hasn't considered asking voters to back a particular funding source.

"Is it time to revisit the issue? I think that's a fair question," he said. "It's certainly worth looking into."

Henderson noted there's never been greater incentive to put up local dollars.

The state provides \$300 million a year for land preservation and parks under the Florida Forever program.

But a growing percentage of the money is going only to local communities that match state funding.

Missing matching dollars

Last year, Broward County and Jacksonville each won more than \$7.2 million in Florida Communities Trust grants the Florida Forever program that targets local projects.

Orange County, on the other hand, snagged only \$480,000.

"It takes money to make money," Henderson said. "You've got to step up to the plate."

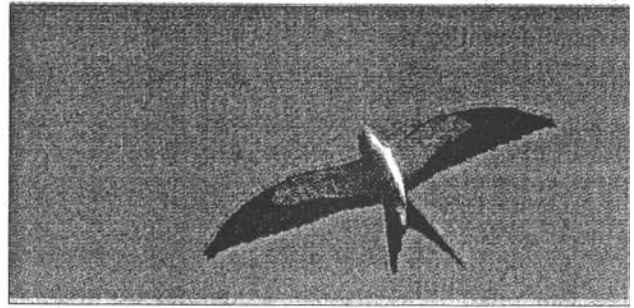
Without a steady source of cash dedicated to the projects it's difficult to plan and set priorities for conservation and parks, said Bob Bendick, director of the Nature Conservancy's Florida chapter.

He said Central Florida has shown signs of heading in the right direction but it's not clear whether there's enough public support and political will to save the most critical areas.

"Unfortunately it's a game you only play once. You can't go back and fix it later. You can't un-develop things," Bendick said.

"The reality is that protecting the natural character and quality of life in a region is only done one time."

A vote this week could save crucial natural acres, but some say it's just a chip off the area's concrete crisis.



Orange falls behind in saving green land

