

Wekiva land bought for state preserve

By Kevin Spear

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

A mile of Wekiva River shoreline and thousands of adjoining acres in Lake County became a state preserve Tuesday after an Orlando developer was paid \$21.4 million in state conservation funds.

The purchase of Maury Carter's land by the Conservation and Recreation Lands program, or CARL, is seen as a major piece in a jigsaw puzzle of Wekiva tracts marked for preservation. Another major purchase was made last month.

Environmentalists said Tuesday that the two purchases could put the Wekiva River on the same footing as the Everglades, the Kissimmee River and other state waterways that have gained extensive environmental attention.

"This is a keystone piece in a natural system all the way from Wekiwa Springs State Park to Hontoon Island" at the lower border of the Ocala National Forest, said Pat Harden, a member of the Friends of the Wekiwa River. "We are extremely pleased."

The southeast corner of the tract runs along State Road 46 and the Wekiva River and spreads northwest covering 9.5 square miles. That's about 3 square miles larger than Mount Dora.

Carter had planned to build a subdivision of 6,000 homes that would sell for a minimum of \$200,000 each. Now the property is part of what state officials and environmentalists hope will become a wilderness corridor from the Wekiva River to the Ocala National Forest.

Big wilderness corridors are thought to be the only hope for the survival of black bears, panthers and other wildlife struggling to live in spite of urban growth.

The Wekiva River begins at the Wekiwa Springs in Orange County. Its northeasterly course runs between Lake and Seminole counties and flows 15½ miles to the St. Johns River. Its basin covers more than 120 square miles of tributaries, wetlands, uplands and pockets of homes and businesses.

The basin was targeted by the Wekiva River Protection Act of 1988 for special protection through land-buying and development restrictions. But little was accomplished until a rush of activity this spring.

Lake County, which contains the biggest share of basin land, amended its land-use master plan to limit development to as little as one home per 40 acres within a half-mile of the river.

Then, on March 29, CARL made its first purchase of basin land since the protection act became law. It paid \$12.5 million for 3,400 acres west of the river and south of S.R. 46 in Lake County.

The purchase of Carter's 6,093 acres came 33 days later. The area was bought from Carter for a price that was the second highest ever agreed to by CARL. The highest was \$22.8 million for 431 acres in the Florida Keys.

Carter bought the land in five sections between 1981 and 1987 for about \$10 million. He had expected the option of rezoning for lots of 1 acre or smaller. But he was soon confronted with increasing restrictions on development.

"We're running scared," Carter said in an interview 11 months ago. "At the time we bought the property, no setbacks were required for the Wekiva River. They went to 50, to 100, to 200, then to 550 feet. The most recent discussions are for 1,000-foot setbacks."

Early last year, he began negotiations with CARL with an initial asking price of \$24.4 million, or about \$4,000 an acre. He said that matched what would have been his interest earnings if he had left his investment in the bank.

He also began drawing plans for a development that would not need rezoning. Plans submitted to Lake County officials called for more than 1,200 5-acre lots.

And Carter got permission from Lake County last year to continue mining dirt and sand from a pit at the southern end of his property.

The mining and development planning were a hedge in case negotiations with CARL failed, Carter said.

Although Carter complained that CARL acted very slowly, CARL officials said negotiations were on the fast track because of the Wekiva River Protection Act and because of pressure from environmentalists.

"The fact of the matter is that it was done faster than any other transaction by CARL," said Duke Woodson, an Orlando attorney representing Carter.

