

THOMAS A. PRICE/News-Press

Ron Himmelman and Pete Johnson of Estero River Outfitters maneuver their kayaks on the Estero River, upstream from where land developers are acquiring acreage along the south bank.

Land buys worry Estero residents

By ED O'DONOGHUE
News-Press staff writer

Agents for two of the region's largest land developers are piecing together hundreds of acres of wilderness and pastureland on the Estero River, west of U.S. Highway 41, most likely for use as sites for luxury residential communities.

The properties, which stretch from the river south 2½ miles to Coconut Road, the northern boundary of Pelican Landing, now are under the control of WCI Communities or Atlantic Gulf Communities Corp.

The land includes two miles of frontage on the river — virtually all of the south bank west of U.S. 41 that is not now dedicated for conservation.

"They are about the last big pieces of developable land between U.S. 41 and the water," said James Colosimo, a land syndicator who controls numerous large tracts of commercial acreage in and around the Estero community.

Even with many special environmental issues that coastal de-

velopment presents, Colosimo said, "they should still be able to work" projects around and through sensitive areas.

"That's the end of the river," remarked Ellen Peterson, a neighbor to the Koreshan Unity Center and Koreshan State Park and member of the Sierra Club.

Boating enthusiasts and environmentalists consider that part of the Estero to be one of the last large reaches of native riverfront habitat in Lee County still accessible to the public.

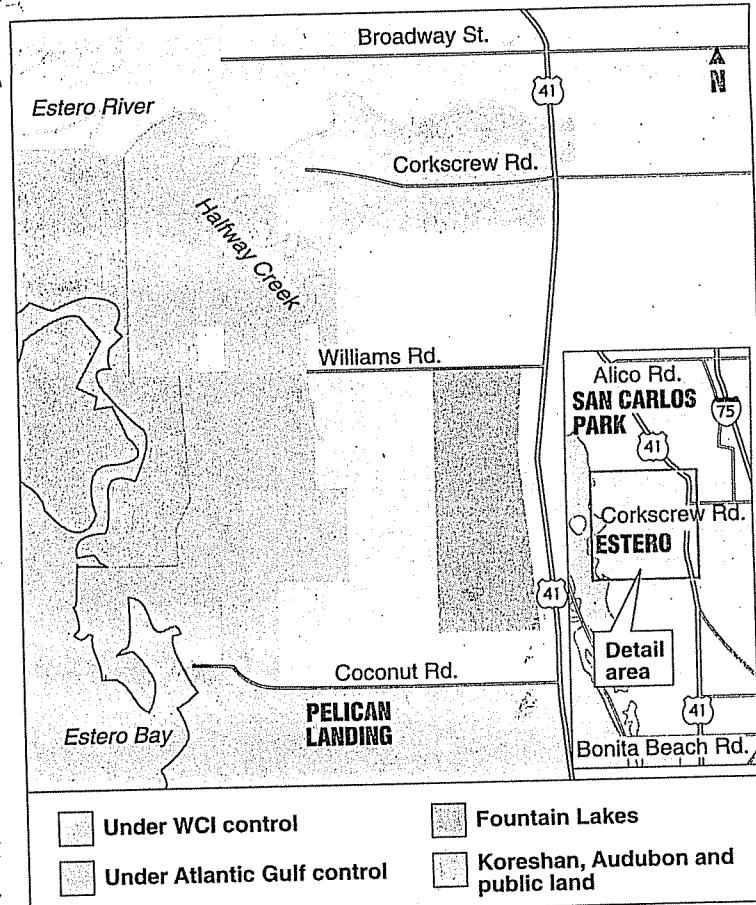
"The river is really full of native species," said Ron Himmelman, a state park ranger.

"You see manatees in it — alligators and snook, too," he said.

From Estero River Outfitters, a canoe rental center at U.S. 41, where he works part-time, the river flows "flat and relatively shallow the 4½ miles to the bay," Himmelman said.

Power boats of up to 17 feet can follow it to where the highway

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SOURCE: Lee County land records, News-Press

JOHN D. TELFORD / News-Press

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INSIDE

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■ **SCHOOLS:** At least 12 Georgia students are hurt when a bazooka shell explodes.
■ **Story / 3A**

■ **UP NORTH: A**

WEEKEND PLANNER

■ **Weather**

■ **SUNNY SKIES:** Mostly sunny today, no rain predicted, with a high in the mid-80s. Partly cloudy Friday with a chance of rain with a change



■ **Circus, circus**

■ **THE BIG TOP:** The Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus opens a three-day run in Naples today, with the



DEVELOPERS: Firms aren't discussing plans

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passes over it, and canoes and kayaks can continue even farther east.

"We all knew it was going to happen," said Chris Stratton, conservation chairman for the local chapter of the Audubon Society, which owns acreage on the river.

"As long as the developers follow the rules, we can't really complain," she said. "But we want to make sure that information about it is shared, and all the regulations are met."

The acreage the developers are acquiring also includes a majority of lands now owned by the Koreshan Unity Foundation Inc., as well as most of Chapel Ridge, a natural line of high-elevation sand dunes lying between Estero Bay and Halfway Creek, a tributary to the Estero River.

George Romese, an official in the agency that oversees the state's Conservation and Recreational Land acquisition program, said much of the property is on the state's list for purchase, but has a very low priority.

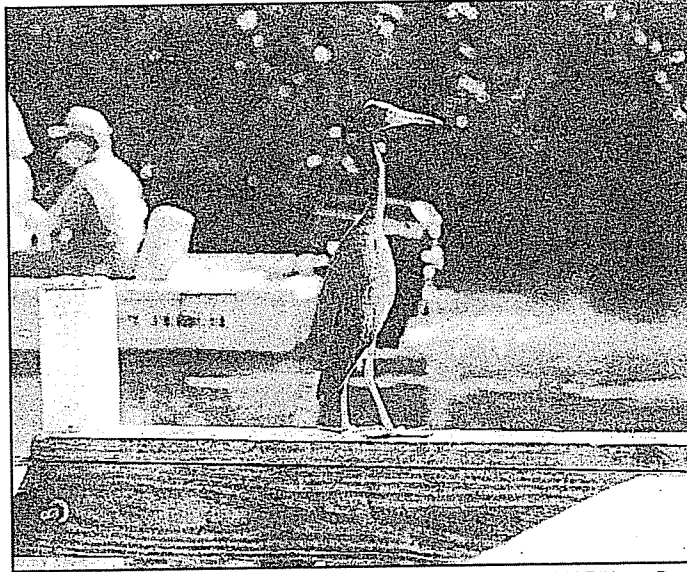
Neither officials for WCI, the land-development arm of Westinghouse Electric Corp., nor Atlantic Gulf, successor to the General Development Corp., are willing to discuss what plans they may have for the land.

WCI is the parent of the 2,400-acre Pelican Landing development, immediately south of the lands in question, as well as of the Gateway community, east of Fort Myers, and the Pelican Bay, Pelican Marsh and Pelican Isle developments in North Naples.

Miami-based Atlantic Gulf is one of the largest real estate development companies in the country. Currently, it owns 67,000 acres in Florida, and another 5,500 acres in Tennessee. Its predecessor, GDC, developed the communities of Port Charlotte and Port Labelle, among many others.

Both Atlantic Gulf and Westinghouse Electric are publicly traded companies.

Atlantic Gulf is on NASDAQ and



THOMAS A. PRICE/News-Press

WATER WATCHER: A blue heron watches afternoon boat traffic on the Estero River, across from property now controlled by WCI Communities. The company, along with Atlantic Gulf Communities Corp., has been acquiring acreage along the river's south bank.

"No plans have yet been made for the acreage, and the company will not comment on any other acreage purchases that may be under consideration."

KITTY GREEN
WCI director
for special projects

is listed in the News-Press as AtlGulf and is trading around 10. Westinghouse is on the New York Stock Exchange, is WstgEl and is trading

not comment on any other acreage purchases that may be under consideration."

A review of the land records at the Lee County clerk's office shows that only one small tract among hundreds in the area is held in the name of either developer.

In October 1993, Pelican Landing Community Inc., a subsidiary of WCI Communities, purchased 12.36 acres at the western end of Corkscrew Road from the Koreshan foundation. It paid \$275,000, or \$22,500 an acre.

Subsequently, a trust administered by Fort Myers attorney Jay Brett paid nearly \$3 million for another 120 acres along the river. The purchases included one from the Koreshan foundation for 12.13 acres. The price: \$285,000. A member of the foundation said Westinghouse has a contract to purchase an additional 150 acres.

Jo Bigelow, Koreshan Unity's president, said, "I have no comment to make about any of our business."

Jack Sims, a Naples real estate broker who has managed several land trusts in Estero since the 1980s, said he has been working as an agent of Atlantic Gulf to acquire title to the numerous tracts along the Chapel Ridge.

He said to date the rights have been obtained to at least 600 acres. If other contracts can be finalized, the number could reach about 1,000 acres.

The bulk of the property includes tracts that he and Timothy Hains, a Naples attorney, have held in trust for years.

David Kersey, trustee for 203 acres that skirts Pelican Landing property north of Coconut Road, said Atlantic Gulf signed an agreement with him this summer to buy his holdings before the end of 1995.

Kersey's tracts are the ones that Affcom Inc., a Delaware-based company, sought a year ago to develop into a nudist resort. Affcom's option on the property lapsed earlier this year.

The north bank of the river is mostly developed with communities of manufactured homes.

ARREST: Development shocked grandmother

From Page 1A

Wells' news conference and many gasped and sobbed as Wells said Smith would be charged with murder.

Alex and Michael's great-grandmother expressed shock at the events.

"I just couldn't imagine that Susan would do that. She always seemed to be such a devoted mother," Sara Singleton said in an interview with KNBC-TV from Sylmar, Calif. Her grandson, David Smith, is the boys' father.

As late as Tuesday, Wells said he was treating the case "as a carjacking that happened as it was reported," though investigators were perplexed about how the car and the boys could have vanished so completely.

On Wednesday, investigators searched Smith's home and took away several bags. Authorities had refused to comment on what they were looking for. There also had been reports that Smith had taken a lie-detector test and that the results were inconclusive.

Smith told authorities an armed

man had jumped into her spotlight in a sparsely wooded area at the edge of town, only to drive several miles, then get her out and took off with her still strapped in their safety seats.

"Our lives have been by this tragic event," Smith said this week, her estranged husband, David, by her side.

The couple filed for divorce in September, and Smith was in custody of the two children.

Smith had been on his way to visit her friend, Mitch Smith, last night the children disappeared. Wells said earlier in the week that Smith was not a suspect.

Smith, who is white, was charged with the carjacking as an armed and dangerous man wearing a knit cap.

The unraveling of Smith's case bears similarities to the 1991 Stuart murder case in which Stuart, a white man, was charged with killing a black man shot his wife to death. Stuart later pleaded guilty to his death from a bridge as the tors zeroed in on him as the

WEATHER

Late-season storm for

The Associated Press

CORAL GABLES — Tropical Storm Florence formed in the Atlantic on Thursday evening, the first time in five years a storm formed so late in the Atlantic hurricane season, forecasters said.

Florence is the sixth tropical storm of the season, which lasts from June 1 until Nov. 30.

At 10 p.m., the storm was located at 26.1 degrees north latitude and 52.6 degrees west longitude, or about 840 miles southeast of Bermuda.

The storm posed no immediate threat to land, said hurricane special-

ist Lixion Avila at the National Hurricane Center in suburban Miami.

Avila said the last tropical storm this late in the season was Tropical Storm Karen, on Nov. 2.

"The active part of the season goes from August to October. We've had many tropical storms in the past in November," he said. In 1985, Hurricane Kate hit the United States, and in 1989, Hurricane Lili around Christmas.

Florence's maximum winds were 40 mph — the strength for a tropical storm, forecasters said. Florence was moving toward the northwest at 6