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NEWS : ENTERTAINMENT : CLASSIFIEDS : REAL ESTATE : INSIDE NAPLES

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NEWS

One Mound Key landowner offers to sell ... at the right price

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By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD, Staff Writer

At least one private landowner on Mound Key says he believes the island and its Calusa artifacts should be preserved, but he says it's up to the state and county to make a purchase offer that matches the land's value.

Woody Hanson, whose family for four generations has owned 10 acres of what was once the Calusa capital of Southwest Florida, said the state made his family an offer of \$100,000 for the land a few years ago. Hanson, a property appraiser who's president of the national association of property appraisers, said the land is worth closer to \$800,000.

Having recently authored an article on how to establish the value of land purchased for conservation and having spent a career testifying as an expert witness in land disputes, Hanson said he knows what the land is worth.

"They offered me \$100,000, and it was my understanding they had an appraisal for \$200,000 in hand," he said. "I know every appraiser in the state of Florida, and I know that's not a good appraisal. They turned me off."

Hanson said the sale of Buck Key six months ago is a good starting place to establish value for Mound Key. He said Buck Key was sold for what amounted to \$115,000 for every development unit that could be permitted. With about seven upland acres in the family's 10-acre piece, Hanson could be allowed seven units without having to go through the rezoning process. The math puts the property value at \$805,000.

"That would be my starting point," Hanson said. "You'd have to deduct for the cost of a well and for sewage."

Hanson said the nature of the upland soil - the uplands are almost entirely shell mounds created by generations of Calusa Indians who discarded the shells of the oysters they ate - makes septic tanks

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impractical on the island. For someone who could afford to live on Mound Key, however, a few extra dollars for sewage disposal might be a small matter.

Many had assumed the entire 125-acre island in the middle of Estero Bay was already completely owned by the state, but 26 acres has been privately owned for generations. Without rezoning, each landowner would likely be permitted to build a home for every upland acre, a prospect another long-time owner, Margerett Paull, brought home to local preservationists a few weeks ago when she took the first official step toward receiving development approval.

Mound Key is believed to have been the center of Calusa civilization from about 500 to 1500 A.D. Archaeologists and preservationists say its extensive shell mounds and other artifacts make it the most important cultural and historical site of its kind in South Florida. Most of the island was donated to the state by the Koreshans when they handed over what is now the Koreshan State Historic Site in Estero.

Hanson said he knows Mound Key is important to everyone, not just the families who own small pieces of it, and said it should be preserved, probably by the state or county. He said, however, that he and the other owners want to be treated fairly.

The \$115,000 an acre asking price may be a tough sell, however. When Lee County's Conservation Lands Acquisition and Stewardship Advisory Committee approved seven sites for purchase with proceeds from the county's new green tax, the highest per-acre asking price was less than \$44,000 per acre. Five of the seven site owners were asking for \$5,200 or less an acre.

Only one of those parcels is on a barrier island, however, and that small Pine Island piece is landlocked. County planner Lynda Riley said the committee was briefed on the Mound Key situation at its meeting Thursday and seemed open to the possible purchase.

The county land acquisition program might be the best way to buy the land, because unlike state programs it is not bound by law to pay only appraised value. Commissioner Ray Judah said he has hope for another solution that involves possible permits for other Hanson land near Punta Rassa in exchange for the Mound Key property, and the two men will meet to discuss that possibility next week.

Judah added his voice to the chorus calling for preservation over development for Mound Key.

"Mound Key has the most beautiful black mangrove forest I've ever seen," Judah said. "It's all very, very sensitive from an archaeological and from a resource standpoint."

Though he said he'd like to see it preserved, and he's willing to discuss other options, Hanson said he has thought about rezoning the property for a planned development that could include seven attached low-intensity wooden shelters - eco-units, he calls them - to do tours and interpretive trips to the island.

Lee County's recent loss in the Reahard lawsuit, in which the courts ordered the county to buy wetlands from a long-time Bonita Springs landowner because it wouldn't allow development there, might leave the county with a straight choice between buying the rest of Mound Key or watching it be developed. Hanson said the Reahard case, in which he testified on the county's behalf, might make the county leery of stepping between fourth generation landowners and their rights to their property.

"They're going to take a long hard look at it," he said.

[FRONT PAGE](#) | [NEWS](#) | [ENTERTAINMENT](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [INSIDE NAPLES](#)

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