

Lee, state get additional time to consider Estero land offer

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Ninety days have passed since College of Life president Charles Dauray gave Estero residents, Lee County and state officials 90 days to put together a deal to buy 18 acres of Estero River-front land he wants to develop.

The county's conservation lands acquisition program turned the buy down, but Dauray's extended the time for two more months anyway.

"We had a green light from the county staff, and we still do," said Dauray, president of the private organization that's heir to the Koreshan Unity Foundation, the Utopian sect that called Estero home near the turn of the last century.

The rescheduled zoning hearing for the Riverplace project, which includes an educational retreat as well as a residential and retail element, was to have taken place this week. Instead it will be pushed two more months into the future, and Dauray said if there's serious interest from the state he might delay the hearing again.

"If I get some strong indication from the state that they would like to discuss it, I could," he said.

Carl Hoke, president of the Estero Civic Association, said he was glad to learn the deadline's been extended.

"We do have hopes, anyway," he said.

Hoke and the association gathered around 2,000 signatures urging a purchase, delivering the petitions to local legislators and Gov. Jeb Bush. He said he's heard there's some interest from the state.

Former state representative and current state Senate candidate Ralph Livingston, who's also past president of Friends of Florida State Parks, has been working to get the state interested in a purchase.

"I haven't really heard much back," he said. "But I know they're going to be here next month."

New state parks director Wendy Spencer will visit southwest Florida next month as she continues familiarizing herself with the 152 parks she oversees.

"I wish they moved faster," Livingston said. "But there's a new director, and she's getting her frequent flier miles. At least they've gotten the word."

Livingston said he's been told flat-out that all the good intentions in the world won't mean a thing if the rezoning goes forward.

"I got word that they won't buy at higher than the appraised value," he said. "And if the local government rezones during or before the appraisal, that's a deal killer."

The state learned that lesson purchasing another much larger piece in Estero. The state initially refused to pay around \$16 million for the 1,300-acre Sahdev property. After Lee County commissioners rezoned the land to double its building density the state completed a purchase — for \$32 million.

Another factor that might make a state purchase less likely is the raid by the Legislature on Florida Forever funding this year. As session dragged on and budget questions remained unanswered, less and less money became available.

Livingston said the state's land purchase program still has money available, however.

"In the next decade Florida is going to spend \$3 billion on Florida Forever," he said. "I want to make sure some of that money's used to create state parks."

The \$7 million asking price Dauray hung on the 18-acre parcel has not yet been an issue. The committee running the county's acquisition program examines each piece of land for environmental value before considering price, and decided a relatively small piece of property bordering U.S. 41 wasn't what they were looking for.

Still, the \$380,000 per acre price tag would have been four times the highest price the county's ever paid for environmental land. At \$8.50 per square foot the price for commercially developable land is not outside market ranges, but might be more than environmental purchase programs can stomach.

Hoke said that the parcel may be relatively small, but river-front property is at a premium.

"The developer doesn't create a river," he said. "There's only so much river, and we need to bank it now for the future."

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