

Boomer property may be added to Koreshan

100 acres nominated for purchase through Lee Conservation 20/20

By **DENISE L. SCOTT**, dscott@news-press.com

Published by news-press.com on December 28, 2003

The 200-acre Koreshan State Historic Site could grow by 50 percent if the state partners with the county's preservation program to buy adjacent land along the Estero River.

The 100-acre property, south of Broadway and west of U.S. 41 in Estero, is owned by resident Nola Boomer, whose family was once connected to the former Koreshan settlement.

She and co-owners John and Jorgine Boomer have nominated the \$14.5 million property for purchase and preservation through Lee County's Conservation 20/20.

The nomination is part of the ongoing effort of Estero residents to preserve riverfront property. The county recently turned down Bamboo Island for the program, citing lack of public access and too many exotic plants — problems that don't apply to the Boomer site.

Nola Boomer was out of town and could not be reached for comment.

"Nola is probably very happy to see it go to an environmental agency," said Mimi Straub, president of the Estero Historical Society. "She intends to have lifetime occupancy" of the historic home, which was built in 1917 by the Koreshans.

Lynda Riley, coordinator of the county's Conservation Lands Program, said the property is early in the evaluation process.

The first of several criteria and ranking subcommittee meetings will be Tuesday, Jan. 6. That group will decide whether to turn down the property or take a field trip for a closer look.

If it goes forward, a secondary review would come in February with a presentation at a March meeting, Riley said.

"It's directly north of the Koreshan state park," she said. "That's a very big plus in its favor. In my experience, I think this kind of property will meet the initial criteria."

But, she added, she has not yet gotten feedback from the committee, which could frown upon the asking price or the fact that a house exists on the property.

"There may be some creative ways of finding money. We could partner with the state," Riley said, noting the two pieces of land could be combined for one large park.

Jon Robinson, park manager at Koreshan State Historic Site, said he's excited about the prospect. He said the Boomer property has been identified as being within the park's optimum boundary and that it feeds directly into the river and affects Estero Bay.

"We would be interested in acquiring and managing it from an operational standpoint," Robinson said. "Whether the state could participate, that's at the Tallahassee level."

The state is aware of the Boomer property but has not yet met with the county, said David Buchanan, a planner with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Recreation and Parks.

"Some time after the first of the year, we'll know more where we stand," he said. "We feel the Boomer property should be preserved."

"In our eyes, it's a question of the ability to fund the acquisition of the entire area. It's a hefty asking price."

Buchanan said the county and state could purchase separate portions of the property to be maintained together by the state as part of the park.

"I would like to see the land acquired and put into public ownership and made into a park," he said, noting this may be the state park's only chance for expansion.

"The area is developing," Buchanan said. "This little park is getting hemmed in."

Riley said she does not know whether the county or state will be able to share in the cost or management of the property.

However, such a partnership would enable the county to recoup a portion of the sales price from a Florida Communities Trust grant.

"We're very grateful to the Boomers for giving us the opportunity to try to buy it," she said. "I've heard they've been deluged with offers from developers. This is a community-spirited thing."

Straub said she also is relieved by the prospect of Conservation 20/20 buying the land.

"Adding that woodland to Estero with a lot of riverfront is terrific," she said. "Big development could have gone there. This is a wonderful acquisition for Estero and for environmentalists — if it happens."

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