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College of Life leaders surprised to learn state votes to pursue their property

Tuesday, March 4, 2003

By CHARLIE WHITEHEAD, ckwhitehead@naplesnews.com

A state committee has voted to pursue the purchase of the College of Life property in Estero, a development that comes as news to foundation president Charles Dauray.

Neither Dauray nor the foundation he heads nominated the 18-acre property at the corner of Corkscrew and U.S. 41 for review by the state program, though he did offer the land for county review a year ago. The county's Conservation Lands Acquisition and Stewardship Advisory Committee decided last May the property didn't meet its criteria.

The county committee makes its decisions solely on environmental value, and placed an expectedly low value on a small piece of land fronting U.S. 41. The state's Acquisition and Restoration Council also considers historical and archeological value, and council members voted in February to pursue a full evaluation of the property with an eye toward placing it on the Florida Forever acquisition list.

"We are evaluating based on the merits," said environmental specialist John Barrow of the Department of Environmental Protection. "That's historical and environmental value. It won't rank in natural resource value, but it ranks high in historical."

Dauray said it's interesting that programs are evaluating a purchase he hasn't offered to make.

"I imagine it's some of our friends who like to offer property they don't own for sale without discussing it with the foundation," he said.

Dauray has chafed as groups have discussed the foundation's property without hearing from the foundation.

"No one has called us," he said. "It makes one a little less inclined to get the benefit of their reasoning."

The property was nominated for Florida Forever by the Estero Civic Association. The association has gathered petition signatures supporting a purchase and opposing the foundation's development plans for the property.

The foundation owns around 50 acres at the intersection, land that includes the foundation headquarters and a few historic sites from the days when the Koreshan cult pioneered the area. Cult leader Cyrus Teed had visions of a utopian society preaching celibacy, communal living and the belief the universe was a sphere, with the Earth and everything else inside it.

Teed's followers owned huge expanses of Southwest Florida, including Mound Key, most of Estero and all

of Fort Myers Beach. Over the years land was sold off and donated to the state.

The College of Life is the heir to the Koreshan Unity Foundation, which was established to perpetuate the works and the memory of the Koreshans. Dauray says that's what the remaining property is for.

Plans have included an educational retreat area and a commercial and waterfront development called Riverplace. Lee County planners have recommended the zoning be approved, but Dauray has had the zoning hearing rescheduled three times.


"We did that," he said. "We offered it, and three times we've extended Riverplace, though we've met all the standards the county likes."


Barrow said the state's review will be based entirely on the property itself, not the assessed value or the asking price. The property is appraised for tax purposes at just under \$1.9 million, but when Dauray proposed a purchase to the county's CLASAC it was for \$6.9 million.


If the property passes muster from the Acquisition and Restoration Council, it would go onto the recommended purchase list sent to the governor and Cabinet for approval in December. That would potentially put it on the 2004 purchase list.

The foundation board meets today, and Dauray said it will decide whether to go forward with the zoning hearing scheduled for April 3.

"These things get expensive," he said. "When they hold meetings and we're not invited it makes one a little less willing. It makes one a little less willing to prolong the agony."

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Bonita Daily News, Mar. 4, 2003
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