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Conservation 2020 group to pursue Boomer property

By CHAD GILLIS, cegillis@naplesnews.com

January 16, 2004

Members of Lee County's Conservation 2020 program voted Thursday to continue pursuing a historical 100-acre property in Estero even though the state may purchase the land later this year.

The land is owned by the Boomers, a Koreshan family with south Lee roots extending more than a century. The Boomers were part of the original Koreshan group, a Utopian society, that settled along the Estero River in the late 1800s.

Now, the Boomer property is being offered to Lee County, and possibly the state, for nearly \$15 million. The family wants to see the land and home preserved, and so do many members of the Estero community.

Conservation 2020 members said they'd like to see the land in public hands as well, although some members were concerned about the price.

"I can't think of another property that has this kind of frontage on that quality of a river," said member Mitch Hutchcraft, who also works as a planner for The Bonita Bay Group. "Make no mistake, if that property is not acquired, it will be developed. I think it's a unique opportunity to do something for the county and future residents. Twenty years from now you may look back at this property and say, 'What could we have done with it?'"

George Wheaton, possibly the most conservative member on the committee, said spending \$15 million on one purchase would require nearly a year's worth of Conservation 2020 revenue, which is generated by property taxes.

"We buy this and one more piece of property and we're out of business for the year," Wheaton said.

The group will visit the land soon and vote a second time on whether to bring it to county commissioners, who make final decisions on Conservation 2020 purchases.

Committee Chairman Rick Barber, who works as a development consultant, said purchasing the Boomer property could be one of the best moves the program has made.

"We've looked at some properties in Estero and we haven't been able to do anything yet," Barber said, referring to Bamboo Island and the College of Life Foundation land along the Estero River. "I can't imagine a more important piece of land for this program. I can't think of a better piece to buy at the end of the day."

The Boomers want to retain 25 acres of the land as a life estate, meaning that some surviving relatives would be able to stay in the historic home for the remainder of their lives.

Several preservation scenarios are being considered by the county and Florida Forever, the state's land preservation program.

One option is to have the county buy the land outside the estate and let the state purchase the home and surrounding lands. The home could then be added to the Koreshan State Historic Site.

Another option is for the county or state to purchase all the land as one project.

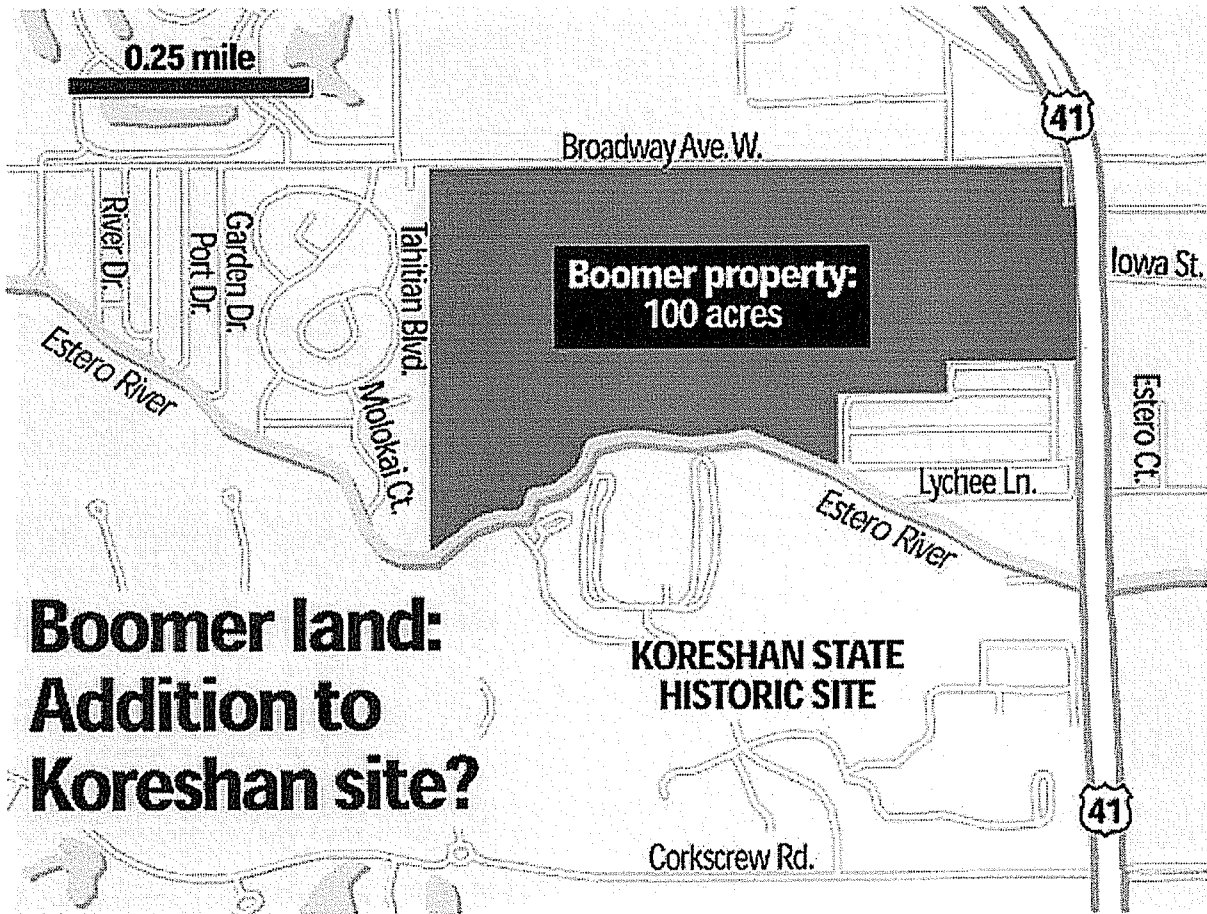
Conservation 2020 program director Lynda Riley said she and Florida Department of Environmental Protection officials filed a Florida Forever application for the Boomer land on Thursday.

Riley and the county staff suggested Conservation 2020 members continue to consider the land at least until the state has a chance to vote on it next month.

"They're very interested in buying this, although they don't have the authority to purchase it yet from the governor and Cabinet," Riley said. "If, for some reason, they aren't able to buy it, we could pick up with the acquisition."

The idea of preserving the Boomer land has received enormous support from the Estero community. Riley said she has already received about two dozens letters from residents and groups such as the Estero Historical Society.

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Boomer land: Addition to Koreshan site?

Sources: ESRI; GDT; Lee County, Lands Division

Kori Rumore/Staff

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