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## **Land-value drop boosts preservation purchases** ***Owners race to offer properties to public conservation programs.***

*By Martin E. Comas, Sentinel Staff Writer*

Central Florida's sagging housing market has turned into a blessing for at least one group: land conservationists.

Counties have struggled for years to buy and save ecologically sensitive land from being paved over. In many cases, land prices were too steep to even consider using tax money to make purchases.

But falling land prices and lack of home-builder interest now have property owners flocking to public land-acquisition programs, looking to sell. In Lake County, for example, itchy property owners have flooded county offices with applications, asking officials to look at their acres of old scrubland, citrus groves and pastureland. About 10 applications come in a month.

"They're coming in droves," said David Hansen, director of Lake's public-lands-management program.

If the property is suitable, county officials are happy to oblige. This year, Lake purchased 1,232 acres for a total of about \$12 million -- including 809 acres of pastureland in the environmentally sensitive Green Swamp.

Publicly acquired land must be used for conservation or passive recreation areas where campsites, hiking paths or bike trails are added. Or the property must help improve the water quality in nearby rivers and lakes by adding vegetation and stormwater drainage.

In Osceola County, officials plan to close next month on a 2,100-acre spread -- once owned by the Bronson family -- for \$15 million. Filled with native Florida flatwoods, wetland hammocks and dry prairies, the land will be turned into a passive park.

At about \$7,142 an acre, county officials call it a bargain.

"I can't see us getting land in the future for that price even in a slow market," said Randy Mathews, environmental-land coordinator for Osceola County. He estimated builders could feasibly offer up to \$12,000 an acre for the rural parcel to build homes.

### **'You still want to prioritize'**

Keith Fountain, director of land acquisitions for the Florida chapter of The Nature Conservancy, said the downturn in the real-estate market makes it an ideal time for counties to acquire significant properties.

"But even in this type of market environment, you still want to prioritize and get the most ecologically important properties," he said. "Otherwise, what you're going to see is that before you know it, your money is gone and the chance to acquire these lands."

Charles Lee, director of advocacy for Audubon of Florida, agreed.

"This is exactly the time when counties should aggressively be in the business of buying land," Lee said.

However, Lee added, "The mistake would be for a county to buy any parcels that are thrust at them."

### **Boon for home builders**

Even home builders see opportunity in this market.

Bay Pointe Homes submitted an application in September asking Lake County to purchase its 319 acres off County Road 450A. A month earlier, the home builder won approval to annex the property into Umatilla and rezone it from agricultural to residential use. That zoning would allow at least 537 homes.

"That rezoning is definitely going to raise the price," Lake County Property Appraiser Ed Havill said.

Havill said counties -- especially Lake -- often have paid too much for parcels while ignoring that land prices will continue to fall.

"Right now, it's not the right time to buy," he said. "If you sit back and relax, you'll get a better deal."

Roy Zimmer is part-owner of a 215-acre parcel in Volusia County that he and his partners purchased about four years ago near Hontoon Island State Park and the St. Johns River. He initially received an offer from a national home builder for the pristine property.

"Then the market fell out, and that deal kind of fell through," he said.

He and his partners turned to Volusia County, which plans to buy the land through the Volusia Forever land-acquisition program. The county has yet to appraise the property, but Zimmer acknowledged he might receive less money from the county than from a home builder.

"But we love that area," said Zimmer, of Winter Park. "And we feel we owe it to ourselves and our neighbors and Volusia County to have it preserved."

### **Property taxes fund bonds**

Volusia County's program is similar to those in Lake, Seminole and Osceola. Property owners

are taxed about 20 cents or 25 cents for each \$1,000 of taxable-property value. The revenue is used to pay for millions of dollars of bonds issued to buy land.

Orange County, meanwhile, uses tax revenue to fund its Green PLACE program.

In most counties, after a landowner submits an application, county staffers walk the property to see whether it's suitable and conduct an ecological assessment.

The information is passed on to a county advisory board, which decides whether to seek an appraisal and negotiate with the owner. The board then issues a recommendation to the County Commission.

In 2005, Lake County issued up to \$36 million in bonds to buy land after voters approved a land-acquisition referendum. The county has since spent just shy of \$20 million of the \$36 million buying land -- most of it this year.

With Lake's earmarked funds drying up, property owners see another reason to rush to the county and sell.

"The word is getting out that we're on the downside" of available funds, Hansen said. "Even two years ago, they [developers] could walk on a property and write a check. . . . But we have to go through this process. And if we couldn't meet [a landowner's] expectations, it was: 'Thanks for your interest.' "

### **Rethinking earlier rejection**

Scott Wynn, a Groveland attorney, knows that well.

About two years ago, Lake County offered him about \$300,000 for 32 acres of undeveloped, pristine land lining the banks of the Dora Canal off State Road 19. The property is thick with huge oaks dripping Spanish moss.

He turned down the offer, saying it was too low.

Last week, he said he would consider selling it to Lake County rather than a commercial or residential developer.

"It's such a beautiful piece of property, and it's in the middle of Tavares, a developing area," he said. "But I would prefer that it be preserved."

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