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# Orange, Osceola will split the tab to save Split Oak Forest

By Roger Roy

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Orange and Osceola counties want to establish a multimillion-dollar conservation park on three square miles of forests, swamps and scrub land straddling the county line.

The 1,845-acre property, known as Split Oak Forest, adjoins Moss Park and Lake Hart east of Narcoossee Road. About two-thirds of the property is in Orange County and the remainder in Osceola.

County officials say the property is worth \$7.3 million, or \$4,000 per acre, and is destined for development if it is not preserved.

Today, Orange County commissioners will consider putting up \$2.3 million of that price with money from the newly enacted tax on public services such as electricity and telephones. The county hopes to get another \$2.3 million from a state grant.

Monday, the Osceola County Commission approved paying \$2.7 million for its share of the property, possibly with the help of a state loan.

The park would be managed by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

Both counties eventually would be repaid by developers of large projects who have to provide money or property in exchange for building on a wildlife habitat. The law stipulates that if developers pave over land where gopher tortoises live, for instance, they must give up or buy land somewhere else for preservation.

Orange County planner Sherry Hooper said the Split Oak property is home to several endangered and protected species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker and the gopher tortoise.

Orange County commissioners expressed support for the plan Monday.

"I'm excited about it," said Orange County Chairman Linda Chapin. "It will give us a large piece of property that will be protected for future generations."

Orange County plans to put up its share of money from the public services tax, which is expected to raise at least \$30 million per year. County Planning Director Ed Williams said county law states that at least \$7.5 million of that will be spent annually on parks, recreation and environmentally sensitive lands.

The money wouldn't be needed until the 1992-93 budget year, but the county must apply for the state matching grant by Jan. 3, Hooper said.

The property is owned by Maury Carter, who acquired part of it in 1973.

"It's absolutely beautiful property, huge live oaks that people say are hundreds of years old," Carter said.

The name Split Oak Forest comes from an unusual oak tree south of Lake Hart that was split all the way to the roots, Carter said. Both halves of the huge tree fell to the ground but continued to live and have sprouted new limbs, he said.

There is also an abundance of wildlife.

"Deer, turkeys, hogs, sandhill cranes, eagles, hawks, you name it," Carter said.

Carter has never allowed hunting on the property.

"The game is very tame now," he said.

Carter would not say what price he has asked for the property, but he said it is higher than the county's offer of \$7.3 million.

Development plans for the property had included a golf course and subdivisions, but Carter said he would rather sell the land for a conservation park.

"We'll sell it cheaper for preservation than we would for development purposes," he said.

*Will Wellons of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report.*

