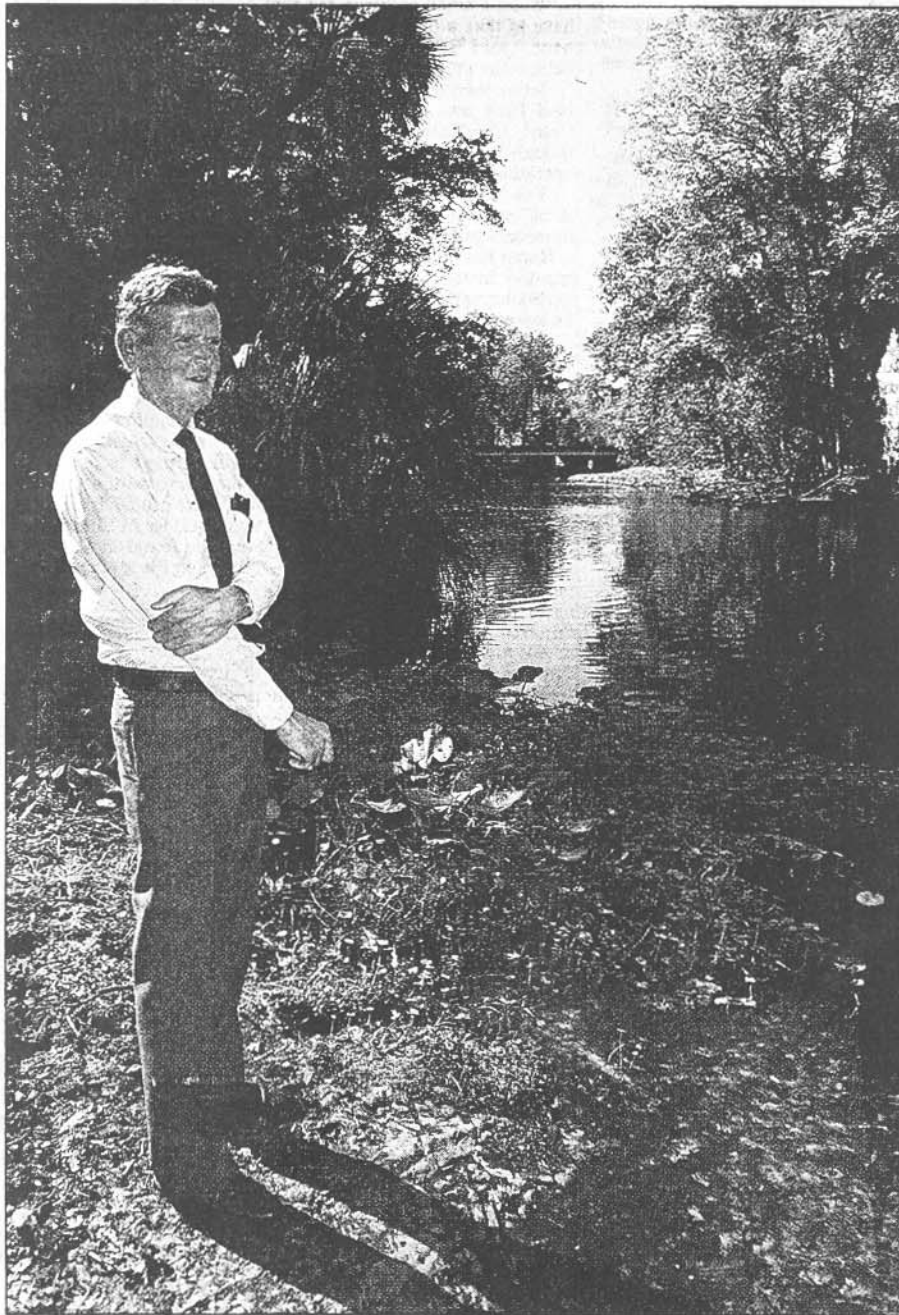


Wekiva River developer in a quandary



EILEEN SAMELSON/SENTINEL

Maury Carter at Black Water Creek: 'We have a very large investment back here.'

MOUNT PLYMOUTH — The fate of thousands of wooded, undisturbed acres along the Wekiva River rests with Maury Carter, an Orlando developer who comes across with soft-spoken hospitality and a willingness to please.

He doesn't duck questions or scrimp on time for visitors.

At his property, a photographer eyeing Carter for a snapshot asked him to step closer to a stream listed among Outstanding Florida Waters. "I'll wade in if you like," he said without apparent concern for his business suit.

With his generous nature Carter seems capable of dashing his signature across the title to his 6,680 acres and giving the pristine river basin land away for the protection of black bears, storks and wetlands.

But it won't happen. "We have a very large investment back here," said Carter, while one-handing the wheel of his Jeep along a rugged trail. "We feel like we are going to have to develop what we can while we can."

The property, bordered on its east side by the Wekiva River and spanning an area between State Roads 44 and 46, has become a white elephant of real estate for Carter. When he bought the land in four parcels for more than \$10 million in the early 1980s, his plans were to save it for development decades later.

But interest in protecting the spring-fed Wekiva River and its basin has surged in the past two years. The Wekiva River Protection Act passed by the Legislature in 1987 cut into development options for landowners such as Carter.

"We're running scared," Carter said. "At the time we bought the property there, no setbacks were required for the Wekiva River. They went to 50, to 100, to 200, then to 550 feet. The most recent discussions are for 1,000-foot setbacks."

When he bought the land, Carter also expected the option of rezoning to build lots of an acre or smaller. Today, he expects to be allowed to build on lots no smaller than 5 acres in most areas of the tract.

A subdivision of 5-acre lots would not be a pretty sight, he said.

His engineers are at work, drawing up plans for more than 1,200 5-acre lots. There would be more than 30 miles of internal roads. And worse, in Carter's eyes, there would be no deed restrictions for fencing, type of home construction, or other use of the lots.

"It's just total destruction of wildlife," he said. "But I'm not going to sell 5 or 10 acres to somebody in the country and put city-type deed restrictions on them. It would take 100 years to sell the lots."

The alternative for Carter's land, for those who would rather see it preserved than developed, would be a purchase by the state or an environmental group.

Negotiations start at \$4,000 an acre or more than \$26 million for the whole package.

Carter said he has set a fair price, considering the increasing value of Central Florida real estate. Also figured in the cost is lost opportunities in owning the land outright. His investment could have earned millions just sitting in a bank or developing real estate elsewhere, he said.

The Conservation and Recreation Lands program of Florida's Department of Natural Resources has ranked Carter's land as number two on its priority list. Also lumped with Carter's land are two other tracts — 5,600 acres owned by rancher Ted Strawn, and 1,100 acres owned by Timothy Brumlik, an Orlando developer.

Carter has been more than receptive to the conservation program's interest. He has paid for surveys of his tract's boundaries, a key element in negotiations over a sale. He has also given tours to many groups from the Department of Natural Resources and other regulatory agencies.

The tour goes from the Wekiva River to Sulphur Run and across a diverse terrain of rolling hills. It also serves as a message to the state: Buy the pristine basin land now or be very disappointed later.

The developer already has started to build a lake by excavating tons of sand from the south end of the tract. He has dug a hole dozens of feet deep and 20 acres across.

Carter has the Lake County commissioners' permission to excavate another 100 acres just like that soil-grey gash.

Cash from mining the sand — more than a 100 truckloads daily — has been used to maintain the property and pay salaries of a caretaker posted at the tract's north end and another near the main entrance off State Road 46. "The property must carry itself," Carter said.

In several years, Carter expects to begin the reclamation work of turning the pit into a lake. The mine-to-lake project is one Carter has done more than a dozen times in Central Florida. The state even named one of his larger projects Maury Lake.

He said he has taken special interest in leaving a lake rich with wildlife. That requires the correct sloping of banks, steep in some areas and very gradual elsewhere, to resemble the habitat of natural lakes.

In the end, the lake could be a boon for wildlife in a state preserve or a selling feature for a subdivision.

For now, Carter's outlook for his Wekiva basin land will run on two tracks — encouraging the state to take action while directing his planning staff to prepare development plans.

Building a subdivision would not be easy. For starters, Carter would have to complete what most developers dread, a development-of-regional impact study to determine in fine detail the effect of proposed development on roads, services and the environment. Such studies cost about \$100,000 and take years.

"When we bought this property we had planned to land-bank it indefinitely," he said. "We're running out of time."