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Land exchange is in the works

Move would save island flatwoods

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A Pine Island developer and Lee County Parks and Recreation are working with the Conservation 20/20 Program to preserve an additional 321 acres on Pine Island.

Developer Russell Setti has nominated 321 acres of mangroves and pine flatwoods between Pine Island Elementary and Little Pine Island to the Conservation 20/20 program. About one-third of his property is mangroves that are an important habitat for wading birds and white pelicans. The rest is pine flatwoods infested with melaleuca and downy rose myrtle, both exotic to Florida's ecosystems.

Lee County Parks and Recreation has about 42 acres of pristine pine flatwoods, west of the United

Methodist Church at the center of Pine Island. The land was purchased 15 years ago for the future expansion of Phillips Park's athletic facilities. Park and Conservation 20/20 officials realized the land was too perfect to be developed.

"We were going to go in and strip it most of it for the ball fields, preserving only a portion. But it made more sense to preserve the entire property because of its pristine state," said John Yarborough, director of Parks and Recreation.

The Conservation 20/20 Advisory Committee have suggested a trade. A portion of Setti's infested pine flatwoods land would be swapped with the Parks and Recreation land. The Setti portion — next to Pine Island Elementary — would be the site for the new ball fields and the Parks and Recreation land would be remain preserved.

"Basically the county would be buying Setti's parcel with 20/20 program funds and then trading it with parks and rec," said Bill Spikowski, a Fort Myers planner and chief architect of the Pine Island plan. "It is a nice moment when people on all sides come together to agree on something. It is a little strange, but it really makes sense."

The Conservation 20/20 program was born in 1996 when Lee County residents voted to tax themselves 50 cents on every \$1,000 of property value every year for purchase of land. Since its inception, more than 10,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land has been purchased for preservation and restoration.

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Lindsay Riley, Conservation 20/20 Program coordinator, said this is just the first step in the process and there is no guarantee Conservation 20/20 will acquire Setti's land.

"By no means is Setti obligated to sell his land to us," she said. "He could withdraw it from the program or sell it to another party. It is all still open. He is allowing us to review the land for purchase at this point.

"He has nominated it, showing his is a willing seller. He basically thinks the land is good for environmental preservation rather than development."

The News-Press was unable to reach Russell Setti for comment.

Commissioner Bob Janes said this is another example of how well the Conservation 20/20 program is working to preserve Lee County's natural lands.

"I think he (Setti) realizes he was facing almost insurmountable opposition for development," he said. "I was pleased with our 20/20 committee to seize on it."

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