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Lee revitalizing Lehigh properties

Forgotten parcels to become parks, schools, green space

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Lee County is buying property in Lehigh Acres from absent owners who aren't paying their taxes.

About 7,000 properties throughout the county have accumulated about \$2 million in cumulative back taxes

A majority of these vacant properties are in Lehigh Acres, although there are a few in Fort Myers and the Dunbar and Charleston Park areas.

"There are a few scattered lots in Cape Coral," Forsyth said. "But not as many as there used to be. The bulk of the properties are in Lehigh."

County commissioners have allocated \$250,000 for the first phase of the project, which will begin in about two weeks. All the properties are unoccupied; the majority do not include structures.

Forsyth said in this first phase, she is targeting 660 properties in Lehigh Acres to buy and set aside for green space, parks and maybe schools.

"We're working on this slowly," Forsyth said. The first location she's targeted is in the Greenbriar Boulevard area, which has been vacant for many years.

According to a Lehigh Acres Commercial Land Use Study done in 2000, the original developers of Lehigh Acres "failed to provide enough commercial sites. They also did not reserve any sites for public facilities such as schools and parks."

Maintaining green space in the area is crucial to water recharge for wells in nearby housing developments, said Wayne Daltry, Lee's director of Smart Growth.

"It's one of the higher spots in Lee County," Daltry said. "And recharge works best when there is greater distance (from the surface) to sea level."

If, after the announcement of the county's plans, the properties sell to individuals or developers instead of the county, Forsyth said that's all right.

"It's a good opportunity for the county, no matter what the outcome is," she said. "If the properties are purchased by someone other than the county, that's good for the county and the taxing authorities who will

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recoup their lost revenues.”

That’s something Forsyth wants to warn people about. If people want to buy these delinquent lands, they will have to pay all of the back taxes to any of the eight different taxing agencies, which include Lee County, the East Lee County Water Control District and the fire and school districts.

Sometimes, these charges can be pretty steep.

Charlie Green, Lee’s clerk of courts, said he’s seen back taxes on properties reach \$100,000. Usually, though, the range is from about \$250 to \$1,500, Green said.

Green said he also has a warning for potential buyers: Make sure you know what you’re buying.

“There was a woman who bought a property and she did not do her homework,” Green said. The lot was too small to build on and easements prevented her from doing anything with the property.

“People need to know what the property looks like and what the boundaries are,” Green said.

If Forsyth’s plan fails and the properties the county buys don’t turn out to be clustered or aren’t good for parks or schools, the county can resell them.

“That’s not the goal,” Forsyth said, “We’re not looking to acquire these for resale. We’ll see as we go along what we get and what makes the most sense in the public’s best interest.”

Property owners who aren’t paying their taxes will be notified by mail that their properties will be sold if they don’t immediately pay their back taxes.

But even the notifications can be difficult.

One of the main problems, Forsyth said, is that many of the property owners live out of state or overseas. Many have received the property as part of an estate and may not realize they own land in Florida, she said.

“They will be notified that if they don’t redeem their property, their property will be sold,” Forsyth said.

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