

Large new park makes headway

Site would be part of proposed West Ashley development

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How big is it?

Park Size

Hampton Park 65 acres

Cypress Gardens 170 acres

James Island County Park 643 acres

Palmetto Islands County Park 943 acres

North Charleston Wannamaker County Park 1,015 acres

Proposed Long Savannah County Park 1,568 acres

In a deal that could create the region's largest county park and clear the way for a 3,600-home subdivision, the Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission has agreed to pay \$6.5 million for 1,568 acres in far West Ashley.

The land is part of the proposed Long Savannah development, located west of Bees Ferry Road in a part of the county where subdivisions give way to forest, swamps and old phosphate mines.

About 600 acres of the land are high ground, some of which are islands surrounded by marsh, and the property offers access to Rantowles Creek.

The deal with Associated Developers

Inc. hinges on Charleston County agreeing to move its "urban growth boundary" that defines the end of suburban development. Supporters of the plan, including the Coastal Conservation League, have taken the position that a huge park would punctuate the end of suburban growth better than a line on a zoning map that future councils could change.

Commissioners had been divided about the land buy for months as they pored over the details behind closed doors. They finally struck a deal this week, and Charleston County Council will be asked to approve it July 24.

Commissioner Robert New said he has misgivings, largely because less than half of the site is buildable land and because new roads to those sections could cost a lot.

"I was the person who was most adamantly opposed to this and ultimately did support it," New said Thursday. "I have some real concerns about the viability of that site, but I think it's potentially doable, and for the price, we take a lot of potential development area off the table. It was a trade-off, and it was a close call."

Long Savannah initially drew heated opposition from the Red Top community, but its opposition faded when the developers offered a \$1 million payment to the Red Top Improvement Association, agreed that Bear Swamp Road will not be widened and dropped "Plantation" from the proposed development's name.

New said he changed his mind partly because of support from nearby residents, partly because the price had dropped from \$8 million to \$6.5 million and partly because of the sellers' offer to include some 200,000 cubic yards of dirt from dredging shallow phosphate mines on the site. That dirt would help build the roads necessary to access the park.

But the deal involves more than a park; it would clear the way for one of the county's largest subdivisions. Moving the growth boundary would allow Associated Developers to build as many as 3,600 homes, about 2,100 more than current zoning allows. Charleston Mayor Joe Riley has supported the deal and said the city likely will annex the development at the builders' request.

If County Council approves the park deal, the land purchase would be funded with money from the special half-cent sales tax that voters approved to finance green space preservation and transportation projects.

The \$6.5 million price was hammered out in negotiations, said commission Chairman Kevin Hollinshead.

"They dropped the price, and brought a bunch of concessions, utility easements and dirt to build the park," he said. "It became a more attractive offer."

Those voting to approve the purchase were New, Lisa Steed King, Mark Kearns, John J. Dodds III and Nathaniel Brown. Hollinshead said he did not ask for "no" votes after a majority of the eight-member panel voted for the deal.

Two weeks ago, as the Long Savannah negotiations were ongoing, Riley suggested that the proposed county park could become another memorial to the nine Charleston firefighters who were killed in the Sofa Super Store fire in West Ashley.

"It could be where every firefighter in the region goes for their picnic," Riley said. The city also plans a memorial at the site of the fire.

Hollinshead said the idea of a memorial didn't play into the commission's decision.

County Council members were hesitant to say Thursday how they would vote when the deal comes before them.

Councilwoman Colleen Condon, who represents part of West Ashley, said she thinks the large park is probably a good idea, "but obviously I'll need to look at the specifics."

Councilman Curtis Inabinett, who represents rural West Ashley, said several area residents have told him they're OK with the latest proposal. "As long as they are happy, at this point, I feel pretty good about it," he said. "I was aware that it would probably happen."

Councilman Curtis Bostic, whose district is also nearby, said he's worried that new developments would worsen traffic in the area. "I'm just very concerned we are going to build ourselves into a traffic corner," he said. "That's not to say the PRC shouldn't have

done what they did."

The city is working a separate deal with the Long Savannah developers that calls for buying 232 acres at the end of Bear Swamp Road for \$2.8 million. The land would be used for a city park next to the larger proposed county park.

While the PRC deal may have momentum, County Council still could stop it. "We're the ones who have the funds, so we're not going to release the funds until we vote on it," Condon said.

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