



PRC offers \$4M for acreage

Bid for likely site in West Ashley not without critics

By David Slade
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The Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission has put out a \$4 million offer to buy land for a new county park.

The PRC has refused to name the property, but the offer is widely known to be for nearly 1,600 acres of the proposed Long Savannah development in West Ashley.

Maps of the tract offered to the PRC by the developers have been displayed at meetings of Charleston City Council and the Charleston County Greenbelt Bank Board during public discussions, and the plan is part of a memorandum of understanding signed in May by the Red Top Improvement Association.

Charleston is planning to buy an additional 232 acres of Long Savannah property for a city park.

The county and city land purchases are considered a package deal by supporters, including Mayor Joe Riley, the Coastal Conservation League and the Red Top community group.

Riley said the PRC offer for the land "is a positive step, because it moves in the direction of seeking to acquire it."

Chris Phillips Jr., of Associated Developers Inc., said the PRC offer has not yet been discussed.

The offer is half the \$8 million that Associated Developers and Sintra Development Corp. are asking for the land.

Supporters believe the large greenbelt acquisition would be a bargain at \$8 million, an estimated 39 percent of the market value.

The deal requires expanding the "urban growth boundary" recognized by both the city and the county, for the development.

Supporters say the proposed parks would effectively mark the edge of suburbia more effectively than a line on the map, and would provide needed recreational and open space to area residents.

Critics suggest the land price is too high, and note the developers do not yet own the property they propose to sell, but have it under contract for an undisclosed price.

Opponents also say the deal would amount to creating an amenity for the development and paying for the privilege, and point out that much of the property offered to the PRC is wetlands.

Tom O'Rourke, executive director of the PRC, defended the idea of buying nearly 1,000 acres of wetlands, while not confirming the property is Long Savannah.

"Look at Palmetto Islands (County Park)," he said. "It's mostly swamp land, and we love it. We like nature, we like those kinds of things."

The PRC commissioners have been divided on Long Savannah, and have discussed the deal only in close-door executive sessions. When voting to make an offer Monday, they called it "property number one."

"I can't confirm it's Long Savannah, but we did make an offer to a landowner for \$4 million," said Kevin Hollinshead, chairman of the PRC commissioners.

The controversial purchase would be funded with half-cent sales tax money if a deal is reached.

The PRC is in charge of spending \$36 million of the money the half-cent sales tax is supposed to raise for parks and green space preservation in Charleston County.

There are seven commissioners on the PRC, but Commissioner Aaron Polkey is one of the lawyers involved in working out the agreement between the Red Top Improvement Association and the developers, so he has recused himself from voting on the Long Savannah property.

Charleston also hoped to use half-cent funds to buy Long Savannah land, but after receiving a cool reception from the Charleston County Greenbelt Bank Board, Riley said the city will withdraw its application for \$2.8 million.

"It almost reads to me like this bank and the PRC are being asked to subsidize the future profits of the developer," Bank Board member Hugh Lane said when considering the application Monday.

Other board members said it wouldn't be appropriate to use greenbelt funds for an "active" city parks with playing fields.

"Upon reflection, the greenbelt pool may not be the most appropriate funding source," said Riley. "We are committed to it and we will identify the funding."

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