

Winter Haven acquires lot for new Lake Conine park

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WINTER HAVEN - This week, the Winter Haven City Commission unanimously approved the purchase of a vacant lot to provide secondary access to the proposed 33-acre Lake Conine Nature Park and a path for stormwater runoff to take to be treated.

After lengthy discussion, commissioners voted to purchase the property, located on the southwest corner of the park, which is along the southern shore of Lake Conine, for \$12,000.

According to T. Michael Stavres, the purchase will be made with funds from the stormwater utility fund. However, he expects the city to be reimbursed for a portion of the expense through grants received before the project is completed.

Although other parcels of land have been available in the general area, Stavres said this property offers access from Palm Drive and nearby residential areas. The location of the property also lends itself to moving stormwater from the intersection of Avenue Y N.E.

Commissioner Steven Hunnicutt questioned the \$12,000 price tag, which is \$8,815 more than the appraised value of \$3,185.

"I support what we are trying to do with this," Hunnicutt said. "I'm having a hard time swallowing the \$12,000 price tag."

But City Manager Dale Smith said officials have been trying for three years to acquire property to use as a secondary access to the park.

"This is the first piece of property we've had someone willing to sale," Smith said. "Yes, it's more than we are wanting to pay but we have to get from point A to point B."

Commissioner Nat Birdsong indicated the appraisal was par for the area.

"You're not going to get an appraisal you can sink your teeth into on that area of town," he said.

Mayor Jeff Potter said the cost of running utilities lines from a less expensive piece of property farther from the park would make up for any price difference.

Commissioner Jamie Beckett supported the purchase of a safe public access to the

park.

"I truly agree this is the most safe, cost effective place to provide access," Beckett said.

Commissioner J.P. Powell simply said, "I'm for it."

By the contract terms, the closing on the property must take place by June 30.

The \$1.7 million nature park will serve in two ways - to treat stormwater runoff and remove about 70 percent of its pollutants before it enters the lake while providing recreation facilities for residents of the area. It will be largely funded by a grant by the Southwest Florida Water Management District for up to \$300,000 and a grant from the Department of Environmental Protection for up to \$680,000.

Amenities included in the park are a 1-mile loop trail, a fishing pier, kayak launch, playground, picnic facility, paved parking and educational signs.

"The park will be similar to the other three where we combined water quality work and restoration with public recreation," said Mike Britt, the city's natural resources director. "It's the policy of the city to provide recreation with these projects. It's in the best interest of the community to provide public access."

City officials are searching for grant funds, possibly from the Southwest Florida Water Management District to offset the recreation component of the project.

According to Stavres, the design and engineering phase of the project began in 2008 and should be completed by December. He expects construction to begin in spring 2011. Construction will take about nine months.

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