

# Seminole moves to protect natural lands from development after Chris Dorworth tried for swap

Orlando Sentinel – July 15, 2021

When developer Chris Dorworth pitched a plan in early 2020 to swap hundreds of acres of the River Cross development property for Seminole County's Econ Wilderness Area, commissioners rejected the idea, saying the natural preserve was purchased with tax dollars for conservation and was not for trade.

But county leaders and residents realized that any part of Seminole's 6,630 acres of natural lands could easily be swapped away with the approval of a majority of commissioners, even though the lands were purchased with money raised from two voter-approved property tax increases.

Seminole commissioners on Tuesday agreed to enact an ordinance that would require a super-majority vote — at least four votes of the five-member board — to dispose of natural lands that the county purchased for preservation.

The ordinance, expected to be approved in the coming weeks, would add an extra layer of protection to lands that were acquired because of their natural beauty and critical wildlife, Commission Chairman Lee Constantine said.

“We're putting in very strong protections for these lands from ever being used for anything other than recreation and conservation,” Constantine said.

Commissioners also will consider in the coming months whether to place a charter referendum on the November 2022 general election ballot to ask voters whether a super-majority vote from

the commission would be required for the disposal of any natural lands.

“When the River Cross developer proposed that the county give him the Econ Wilderness Area, citizens were amazed that that could actually happen,” said David Bear, an attorney and president of the non-profit Save Rural Seminole, who sent a letter to county commissioners in January with other residents urging the added protections.

In 1990, Seminole voters agreed to spend property tax money to buy environmentally sensitive lands to protect them from future development. The property tax increase raised more than \$20 million over the next two decades. In 2000, voters approved another property tax to purchase an additional \$5 million in natural lands for preservation.

In total, the revenue from both taxes was used to purchase a dozen natural land sites now open to the public, including the 230-acre Econ Wilderness Area near Old Lockwood and McCulloch Roads, just west of the Econlockhatchee River. Other sites purchased from those levies include the Black Bear Wilderness Area, Spring Hammock Preserve, Lake Harney Wilderness Area, Black Hammock Wilderness Area and the Chuluota Wilderness Area.

County commissioners later zoned those properties as public lands to add a layer of protection.

“But it didn’t add any protections for the swap or the sale of the properties,” said Richard Durr, Seminole’s leisure services director. “We purchased those properties for reasons: For preservation and for passive recreation purposes.”

Commissioner Jay Zembower hopes the new ordinance and a ballot referendum will fix a loophole in the county’s current natural lands ordinance and protect the public open spaces from development.

“We should take care of this once and for all, for our citizens and for their enjoyment of this county,” Zembower said at a recent commission meeting.

Longwood resident Gabrielle Milch agreed.

“The Natural Lands Program that Seminole County has has been of wonderful value to the citizens,” said Milch, who is a coordinator for the St. Johns Riverkeeper, a non-profit environmental advocacy group. “I just hope our natural lands mean more to people than [being traded for development]. I understand that they are developable and that they have a high value, and you can put eight houses on an acre ... But I just hope that we as human beings are not that short-sighted.”

In January 2020, Dorworth and his River Cross Land Co. proposed exchanging the Econ River Wilderness Area for the larger River Cross tract of 669 acres just east of the Econlockhatchee River as a way of settling a federal lawsuit that he filed in 2018 after commissioners unanimously voted down his River Cross development project.

The River Cross plans called for up to 600 single-family homes, 270 townhouses, 500 apartments and 1.5 million square feet of shops, restaurants and offices on a portion of the Hi-Oaks Ranch property in Seminole’s rural boundary.

A federal judge threw out the lawsuit in June.

Besides the new ordinance, Seminole commissioners this week also agreed to discuss in the coming months whether to place some or all the county’s natural lands in the care of a land trust or on a registry to also protect them from being disposed of by a future commission.

“If we’re going to continue to develop the county, then we need to provide parks and spaces for those people to recreate,” said Joe Humphreys, a Sanford resident at this week’s commission

meeting in support of the new ordinance. “People are moving to areas that have good access to what? Outdoor spaces. So, we need to protect what we have now, and we need to try to expand that.”