



State to buy 17K acres of timberland

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An enormous swath of once bustling timberlands in eastern Franklin County, targeted more than a decade ago by The St. Joe Company for development, will soon be protected permanently for its value in preserving the environment and affording tourists a chance to enjoy it.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and his Cabinet voted unanimously at a May 28 meeting, their first in three months, to approve spending as much as \$43 million in Florida Forever funds to buy 17,080 acres, known as the Dickerson Bay/ Bald Point project, that sprawl across both Franklin and Wakulla counties.

This nearly 27-square mile stretch of land runs between Bald Point State Park and Tate's Hell State Forest, and includes portions of St. James Island, the site where St. Joe nearly 15 years ago secured permission from the county for a land use change that provided for 2,840 resort and rural residential units on 5,204 acres.

The real estate collapse ended St. Joe's dreams, and in 2014, the Bald Point lands became part of a seven-county, 380,000-acre package of Panhandle timberlands the company sold the Mormon church for about \$562 million. The Bald Point lands were a \$33 million chunk of that land deal.

Florida's plan is to buy the land from Nature Conservancy, which has negotiated an option agreement to purchase the lands from the Salt Lake City, Utah-based Ochlockonee Timberlands. The state hopes to pay about \$37.8 million of the \$43 million purchase price, which amounts to \$2,518 per acre.

The Nature Conservancy has committed to kicking in \$2.25 million of the purchase price, with another \$3 million coming from a military restrictive easement, provided the Air Force approves it as a means to protect its flight operations.

The property is part of a watershed that feeds into portions of Ochlockonee Bay and Alligator Harbor, considered by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection as critically important to the Gulf's seafood and tourism industries.

"Acquiring the subject property provides a permanent means of protecting and restoring the estuaries that recreational and commercial fishers rely on for finfish and shellfish species that are the economic lifeblood of the region," wrote DEP staffers in their analysis.

"Called The Bluffs, the property features an astounding 17 miles of frontage on some of Florida's most beautiful waterways, including two miles on the Gulf of Mexico, six miles on Ochlockonee Bay, and over eight miles on the winding Ochlockonee River," they wrote.

Most of the acreage is uplands with sandy soils and picturesque bluffs that rise to over 20 feet, bordering the southwestern edge of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and connecting to Tate's Hell State Forest, Bald Point State Park, and Alligator Harbor Aquatic Preserve.

"Access to Ochlockonee Bay, Alligator Harbor Aquatic Preserve, and several of the ponds, provide opportunities for paddling and fishing," wrote the staff analysts. "The expansive network of woodlands and roads can easily accommodate hiking, biking, and nature studies. The subject property's large size also makes hunting feasible.

"Additionally, the property's road frontage expands the possibilities for siting of a campground and visitors center," they wrote.

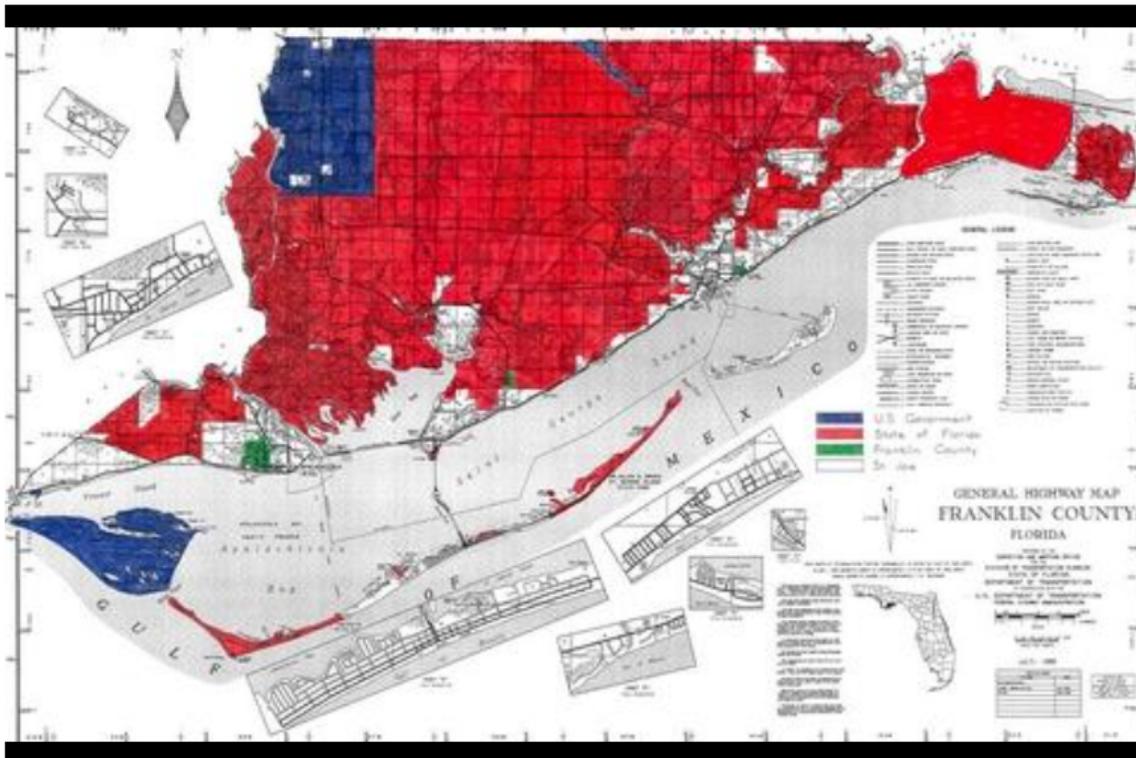
"Together with the surrounding and adjacent lands already managed for conservation and public use, the Bluffs will provide significant protection at a landscape-scale and watershed level," they wrote, noting the acquisition will enhance the western portion of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, as well as buffer the nearby productive waters of the Alligator Harbor, Big Bend Seagrasses and Apalachicola Bay aquatic preserves.

"An interconnected system of managed landscapes and watersheds will provide critical habitat for wide-ranging vertebrate species such as the Florida black bear, numerous waterfowl, and other migratory bird species, as well as provide

tremendous ecosystem resiliency for sea level rise and climate adaptation,” staff wrote.

“Acquisition of the Bluffs will provide a permanent means of protecting and restoring estuarine ecosystems and freshwater sources for recreational and commercially important finfish, such as speckled sea trout, redfish, black drum, snapper, grouper and mullet, and shellfish species, such as oysters, pink shrimp, scallops, blue crabs, and stone crabs - the economic life-blood of the region and the keystones of the ecology of the near-shore Gulf,” wrote staff.

They noted the acquisition encompasses three separate areas of uplands around Dickerson, Levy and Ochlockonee bays, which provide foraging habitat for endangered sea turtles, citing, juvenile Kemp’s Ridley turtles, as well as rare birds, such as wood storks and bald eagles.



▲ HIDE CAPTION

The solid red portion in the upper right of this map shows the land to be acquired, adding to the other red areas that are publicly owned.

“The uplands surrounding the three bays are an intricate mosaic of lakes, depression marshes, mesic flatwoods, that support populations of rare animals such as Sherman’s fox squirrel and gopher tortoise, scrubby flatwoods, and scrub

connected with the marine communities by numerous tidal creeks, salt flats, and salt marshes,” they wrote.

Plans call for a portion of the newly-acquired acreage to be managed by the Florida Forest Service as an addition to Tate’s Hell State Forest, and a portion to be managed by DEP’s Division of Recreation and Parks as an addition to Bald Point State Park.

In his report to the county commission Tuesday morning, Alan Pierce, the former county planner, said the county will receive some monies from timber sales, and payments from the state in lieu of the paltry property taxes it has received from these lands zoned agricultural, but that there were no guarantees concerning the amounts.

Beyond that, the acquisition will mean the county’s land mass that pays no property taxes will grow even more than the current 85 percent.

“This takes a big chunk of land off the tax rolls,” Pierce said.

He said the state has an interest in seeing that the environmental protections contribute to growth in the tourist industry. Pierce said he told state officials it was crucial for the state to provide help, such as funding a boat ramp and parking on Alligator Point to be used by those engaged in aquaculture.

“I warned them we have future needs coming up,” he said.

He said state officials showed concern over the effect a massive land buy such as this will have on the ability of the county to provide affordable housing.

“That land could have been developed,” Pierce said. “They are concerned about that.”

Commissioners Smokey Parrish underscored the need for state help as the county responds to increased tourism.

“We have to have sufficient parking for these people,” he said. “They need to help us.”

He said that with state estimates of as many as 150,000 annual visitors to Bald Point in the years ahead, “there isn’t the capacity for people to visit Bald Point.”

Pierce downplayed the state's projections. "Bald Point is a semi-beach environment," he said. "That's pretty high (when they're) trying to sell the acquisition as a benefit to tourism.

"I told them 'You guys are going to have to make a lot of improvements,'" he said.

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