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Published Wednesday, June 7, 2006

Officials Discuss Lake Kissimmee Park Plan

By TOM PALMER
The Ledger

LAKE WALES -- Lake Kissimmee could be the site of a new county park.

Polk County and South Florida Water Management District officials met Monday morning near the lake to discuss turning over a 120-acre tract to the county.

The site is situated along the lakeshore and includes a linear oak hammock, which is characteristic of much of the lake's western shore.

"This seems to be a pretty good location," County Manager Mike Herr said.

Fred Davis, director of SFWMD's Land Stewardship Division, said the district would build a new boat ramp, a new access road and day-use facilities such as picnic shelters.



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He said after the meeting he will send Don Wilson, Polk's leisure services director, a letter outlining SFWMD's commitments. Wilson is expected to bring the issue to the County Commission for consideration once the details are worked out.

Mike Callender, Polk's parks superintendent, said he would like to develop a campground at the site to generate enough revenue to justify full-time staffing. He said the site, which is about 25 miles from Lake Wales, would not be practical to maintain otherwise.

Another unresolved issue is how practical it would be to develop a campground. A key issue will be whether the county would be able to get a permit to put a sewer plant there to serve the campground. There are no public utility plants nearby.

One concern about the feasibility of developing the campground is whether the area would become too wet as a result of the plan to raise the maximum lake level from 52.5 feet to 54 feet above sea level.

SFWMD's Davis said the lake would rarely rise that high -- the models say 18 days every 20 years -- to be of great concern.



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He added there would be few people interested in camping when the weather was that wet, anyway.

County Commissioner Bob English, who accompanied Herr, Wilson and Callender on the visit, said the county could deal with that issue down the road. The short-term priority would be to open the park to provide access to the lake.

Although 34,498-acre Lake Kissimmee is the fourth-largest lake in Florida, there is relatively little access. SFWMD's efforts to raise the lake in connection with the Kissimmee River restoration and the Florida Department of Transportation's plans to rebuild the State Road 60 bridge resulted in the closing of Oasis Marina, Shady Oaks Fish Camp and The Rocks.

The closing of the Shady Oaks boat ramp generated a lot of criticism from the local airboating community, something Davis said water district officials should have anticipated.

"We should have been more on our toes," he said.

Airboaters have been particularly vocal because they are not allowed to launch from some private ramps on Lake Kissimmee or from Lake Kissimmee State Park because their boats are noisy. They complain some of the places where they can launch are inconvenient to reach or too remote.

SFWMD officials announced plans in January to build a new boat ramp there, but Davis said the agency is not staffed to handle the day-to-day operations of a park.

Wilson said he wanted to make sure turning the new park into a venue for airboaters doesn't create problems for the county from surrounding residents.

"I don't want people coming to the podium at the County Commission, blaming us for the noise," Wilson said.

That concern is based on the fact that the bulk of the 3,000-acre tract SFWMD officials purchased for \$18.5 million in 2004 as part of the Kissimmee River restoration project is rumored to be destined for development.

Davis said the land has been traded to a private owner in connection with a deal to acquire land near Lake Okeechobee as part of the Everglades restoration project.

The swap was approved May 11 between the water-management district and Indian Prairie Groves, J.F. Ranch and Sixty Nine Ranch, three West Palm Beach-based corporations, and Pomcor 458 Acres LLC, a Miami-based corporation.

That land swap, which SFWMD officials said they had planned all along, has also been controversial because it returned what was briefly conservation land along Lake Kissimmee to the private sector, seemingly in contradiction to the intent of the original purchase.

SFWMD officials said they were forced to purchase the entire tract after it became clear during negotiations with the Speight family, the former owners, that it would be cheaper to purchase the entire tract rather than simply to purchase the 300 acres they needed to raise the lake periodically to 54 feet above sea level.

Tom Palmer can be reached at tom.palmer@theledger.com or 863-802-7535.