

West Volusia's community newspaper of DeLand, Orange City, Deltona, DeBary, Lake Helen, DeLeon Springs, Glenwood, Pierson, Cassadaga, Seville and Barberville in Florida.



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Is this a good time to buy a big new park?



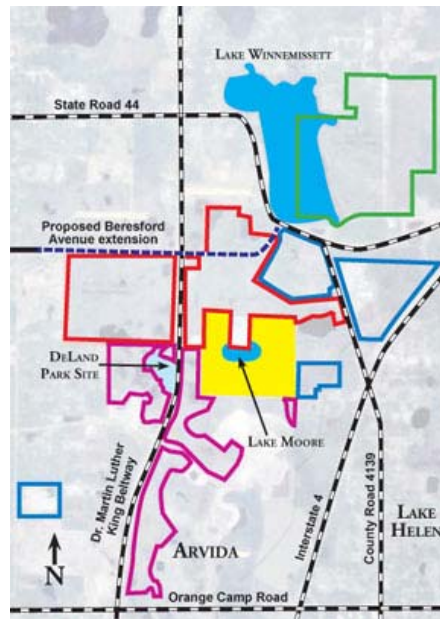
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By [Barb Shepherd](#)
BEACON STAFF WRITER

Editor's note: Welcome to our series of stories on cutting the City of DeLand budget. Certified financial planner Tom Robertson went through the city's current-year \$60 million budget with a red pen and slashed \$4.59 million. We asked city officials to go over the budget with us, department by department, and explain why Robertson's cuts could, or could not, be made. (Read the [first](#), [second](#), [third](#), [fourth](#), [fifth](#), [sixth](#), [seventh](#) and [eighth](#) installments.)

If the City of DeLand must cut

\$5 MILLION
in
5 WEEKS

MAP BY BEACON GRAPHICS

The yellow parcel on the map designated the 100-acre parcel, known as Moore Lake, which the City of DeLand and the Volusia Forever program are trying to buy for a City of DeLand passive park. The purchase price is expected to be about \$6.5 million. The parcels outlined in blue are owned by the Volusia County School Board. The parcels outlined in magenta are set aside for conservation by the developer of Arvida's Victoria Park. The parcels outlined in red and green are privately owned, and are slated for residential development. However, because of the market slowdown, neither parcel is being actively developed.

\$1.3 million to \$3 million from its budget this year because of tax reform, a large part of the job — perhaps the whole job — could be accomplished by axing one whopping \$1.6 million item.

Cut that one budgeted expense, and every other department — police, fire, Public Works, administration — could relax and continue with business as usual.

That's how it looks on the surface, anyway.

The planned \$1.6 million expenditure is in the capital-expenses budget of the city's Parks and Recreation Department. It is money to buy a park.

([Read how](#) Parks and Recreation duties have grown.)

Cutting it, city officials say, wouldn't make the difference people think it would. It won't give the city \$1.6 million to spend in other ways, because the city doesn't have the money. We plan to borrow it.

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In what's being called the Moore Lake Project, the City of DeLand hopes to buy 110 acres of vacant land on the east side of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Beltway, north of the Victoria Park community. The wooded acreage wraps around a body of water called Moore Lake.

Volusia Forever, a county program, will pay 75 percent of the purchase price, expected to be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$6.5 million. The \$1.6 million is DeLand's 25-percent share.

The Moore Lake deal and its exact costs are far from final. The land is on the A-list for Volusia Forever purchases, and that list has been approved by the Volusia County Council.

However, both the County Council and the DeLand City Commission must vote on the exact purchase price, and that price hasn't been determined.

Volusia County's land-acquisition department has obtained appraisals on the Moore Lake property, and is evaluating them now, before making an offer to the owner.

In accordance with an exemption in Florida's open-records law, the appraisals will be kept secret until either a contract with the landowners is negotiated, or the deal falls through.

The Moore Lake land is owned by Volusia Groves and Cattle Co., whose principals are members of the Ford family of DeLand. Several years ago, the Ford family became the owners of another parcel, the property northeast of DeLand High School commonly called Jacobs Dairy, after the City of DeLand and Volusia County declined to pursue buying that land for a park.

There are precious few large, undeveloped parcels left in or near DeLand city limits. This time around, the city doesn't want to miss its chance to preserve a well-located chunk of land in the midst of a growth area.

"It would be an absolutely beautiful conservation tract," DeLand Parks and Recreation Director Larry Nordman said.

To the south, the Moore Lake property borders acreage already set aside for conservation by the developers of the massive Victoria Park community. Just north and east of Moore Lake are high-school and elementary-school sites owned by the Volusia County School Board. Additionally, the city already owns a smaller park site directly across MLK Beltway.

The aggregate effect of all that publicly controlled land in one area adds to the value, city officials said.

"We would end up with 300 to 400 acres," Nordman said. "We're attempting to unselfishly plan for future generations."

DeLand feels confident of the public's endorsement of projects like Moore Lake, because of voters' overwhelming approval of Volusia Forever. In a referendum in November 2000, 71 percent of Volusia County voters agreed to tax themselves to create the special fund for buying land for conservation.

Much of the land purchased with that money has been in the vast, undeveloped wilds that run through the middle of Volusia County.

"We thought it wise to get some of that closer to home here," Nordman said.

The city at first contemplated developing 25 or 30 acres of Moore Lake with ball fields. However, Volusia Forever won't pay for that kind of use, so plans now are for a passive park situated around the water.

"It's a big, Old Florida-looking lake, with a sandy bottom," Nordman said. "We would envision possibly doing things like having a canoe launch, picnic pavilions, walking trails. ... The development wouldn't be terribly expensive."

Development of the park will come later. DeLand may be able to complete the purchase this year, but there won't be money right away for development.

Not buying the park won't lower anyone's tax bills, City Manager Mike Abels said.

"You can walk away from this and it won't affect property taxes one iota," he said.

It's a matter of perpetuating DeLand's quality of life, in the manager's view.

"One of the reasons this city has been a success is that it thought long-term,"

Abels said. "The city has thought very long-term in terms of active recreation. We really don't have anything for passive."

If the city borrows the \$1.6 million this year for its share of the Moore Lake purchase, the hope is that park impact fees, paid by new development, eventually will make the loan payments. The city charges a parks fee on new construction, to fund the demand on parks made by additional residents who occupy the new homes.

The scenario for income from park fees is currently dismal. Without impact-fee revenue, the city could be forced to dip into the general fund to make payments. Abels doesn't think that will happen.

"Impact fees go up and down; they're cyclical," he said. "This is not going to stay in the trough forever. I think, ultimately, the impact fees will take care of the 25 percent."

The gamble is ill-advised, said financial planner Tom Robertson of DeLand, whose scrutiny of the City of DeLand budget is the basis for this series.

"If they saved the money and they have it, I say OK," Robertson said. "But they haven't. ... It's just poor timing."

It's not a good time to be borrowing money or taking land off the tax rolls, he added. Plus, he said, even if the expenses of maintaining a passive park are minimal, they're still new expenses.

"DeLand already has plenty of property on the balance sheet," Robertson said. "Maybe we need to sell some of it."

How many homes will it take to make the park payments?

If the City of DeLand borrows \$1.6 million for its share of the Moore Lake Project, city officials hope DeLand's park impact fee will take care of the payments.

The city charges a fee of \$1,409.77 for each single-family home built in DeLand, to pay for the demand on park services by the new residents. (There are lesser charges for apartments, duplexes and mobile homes.)

The city expects it might borrow the money at 5 percent for 10 years, and owe approximately \$207,000 in loan payments each year.

So, for the payments to be made by park impact fees, 147 new homes would need to be built in DeLand each year during the life of the loan, for a total of 1,470 new homes by 2017.

In making its 2007-08 budget, city officials anticipated \$204,809 in park impact fees during this fiscal year.

However, DeLand Finance Chief Kevin Lewis said, with the slowdown in the housing industry, "it is likely to be more like \$100,000-\$120,000 or so if we are lucky."

City Manager Mike Abels expects the slump will not last forever, and when the housing market revives, the park impact fee will pay for the new park.

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