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Low land prices create buzz to add county parks

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The rain clouds of the real-estate market have a silver lining for those who want more public baseball and soccer fields: cheaper land.

Orange County's parks and recreation department has been scouting dozens of tracts 20 acres or larger across the county. The idea is to buy land at depressed prices and hold onto it until budgets allow for the development of more community parks with fields for youth sport leagues.

"Now's the right time to buy land and bank it for later," said parks director Matt Suedmeyer. Although Orange already has more than 90 parks, "most of them have hit capacity," he said. "Our county is still growing."

Real-estate agents say land prices in Central Florida are about 22 percent lower now than they were at the market's peak in 2005 and 2006.

Suedmeyer said his department wouldn't be raiding any county piggy banks that could be used to hire more deputy sheriffs or firefighters. The money was set aside for parkland from an impact fee of about \$1,200 that has been collected on every house built in unincorporated Orange since 2006. The fund totals \$6 million.

"This doesn't mean we're going on a spending spree," said County Commissioner Linda Stewart, who pushed for the impact fee. "We're going to make sure we get the best bargain for the taxpayers' buck."

Reluctant to spend

Volusia County staff members recently asked county leaders to let them buy land — not for parks, but for off-beach parking.

"The thought is that beachfront property will never be as cheap as it is now," said county spokesman Dave Byron. "But they didn't want to go in that direction." He said that in this time of tighter belts, county officials didn't want to spend the money.

Volusia has an unused \$1 million grant to buy land for a potential park near Osteen. But Byron said the county is putting off using it.

"The county has 54 parks, and we don't have enough money to maintain what we have," he said.

Seminole County Commission Chairman Bob Dallari said his county isn't even thinking about banking parkland.

"If you buy the land — even if you don't build anything on it — you have to maintain it," he said. "That costs you money. We're cutting the budget."

Suedmeyer said Orange also will have to maintain any vacant land it buys, but the prices will make that worthwhile.

Hot-market buys

Lake County Manager Cindy Hall said Lake doesn't have much money to acquire additional public lands now, even if the price is right. Voters approved a public-land referendum in 2004, agreeing to a tax that would pay for a \$36 million bond issue to buy and improve land for parks and conservation.

The county already has spent about \$32 million, including \$22 million to buy 1,818 acres and \$5 million for a share of the Neighborhood Lakes property, a 1,584-acre spread in the Wekiva River basin. But that was back when the real-estate market was red-hot.

Hall said county leaders have no regrets that Lake bought most of its acreage when prices were higher.

"If we had waited, we would have lost out on what we wanted," she said. "Much of that land was being bought for other purposes."

Hunter's Creek hopes

Some Orange County neighborhood leaders are lobbying for the county to buy land in their area, with the most outspoken group so far coming from Hunter's Creek. The 4,000-acre community in south Orange has five privately built and maintained parks, said the development's manager, John Rasnic. But those parks are at capacity and often used by those who don't live in Hunter's Creek, he said.

"There are absolutely no Orange County parks down here," Rasnic said. "We think the county should step in and help because we can't provide anything more."

Suedmeyer said his staff is evaluating potential park sites and likely will make a presentation to the County Commission in October.

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