Some owners reluctant to sell land for forest

Some call the state's price for the land unfair.

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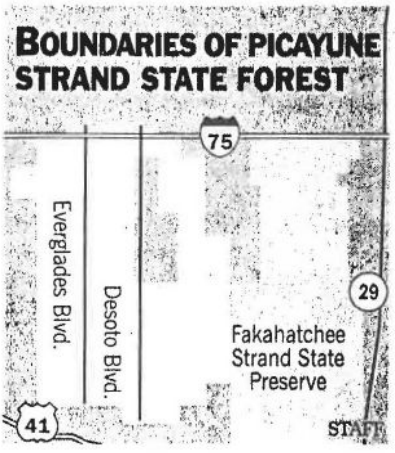

Two Florida environmentalists hold on to their seats as their rented four-door sedan takes them over a bumpy road leading them into the wilderness of southern Golden Gate Estates.

They are tracking a man who owns 800 acres there, south of Interstate 75 and east of County Road 951.

Cliff Fort's land is part of 26,500 acres the state plans to buy in the next five to 10 years to create the 42,000-acre Picayune Strand State Forest. State environmentalists announced Tuesday the chunk of land's designation as a state forest, clearing the way for a state Department of Environmental Protection management plan for the land.

That plan could include outdoor recreation for the public and more room for endangered and threatened animals to roam and for rare plants to flourish in a protected area. Environmentalists also say the project will help protect the Everglades system, which provides communities south of Orlando with 50 percent of their drinking water supply.

Not everyone is excited about the potential though. Some landowners, such as Fort, want to sell their land for the forest, but they say the state's price is not fair. Others do not want to sell at all because of what they have already invested.

"Some of the people don't want to sell," said Gayle Brett, a senior acquisition review agent with the DEP. She went with Fran Stallings, director of the southwest office of the Florida Wildlife Federation, to meet with Fort this

schools and an airport. The price they paid was the market value with those things. It's principle, a lot of people don't want to admit that they made a mistake," she said.

Since 1986, the state Conservation and Recreation Lands program under the DEP has been buying land from owners such as Fort, who have been willing to sell or have gone bankrupt. The state has acquired 15,500 acres so far out of 42,000 acres included in the state forest project.

The DEP paid $13.8 million for these clumps of land dotted throughout the area. It has not projected how much it will cost to purchase the rest of it.

The state has powers of eminent domain, which allow it to condemn land in the boundaries of the state forest, forcing landowners to sell their property. But Brett said this is seldom used. The state would rather make more peaceful settlements with the owners, she said.

Fort, 49, said he thinks he is in the same situation many Picayune landowners have found themselves. He has invested far too much in a piece of property that is too remote for people to be interested in buying and too sparsely populated for utility companies to consider offering services to most of the area.

Land: Some owners won't sell for forest, call state's price unfair

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through the state forest; most of the land is undeveloped.

Fort said he bought part of the land in 1978 and more in 1989 and 1990 for about $1,000 an acre intending to resell it as agricultural land or secluded residential property. He said he was not aware of the state project when he purchased the land.

But Fort thinks the land is worth $5,000 an acre because he has planted 7½ acres of exotic fruit trees, started construction on a home and fenced part of the land.

Fort said the state appraised his land two years ago at $900 an acre. The state plans to reappraise the land to try to make a deal with Fort.

"Areas like this are rare and they are valuable," Fort said. "I'm a guy that's going to get the best price."

Brett said the state will offer a fair price but not at the expense of taxpayers.

"There isn't anything really happening out there," she said. "We pay market value. We're competitive with anybody else in the market. It isn't the state of Florida's responsibility to bail people out who made bad investments. We don't believe that's what the taxpayers want."

Organizing the state forest project is no easy task. There are nearly 20,000 landowners to contend with and the paperwork is enormous, Brett said.

"We buy tiny lots," said Brett. "We're working on it, but it will take a good many years to buy it all. It's so labor intensive."

The department is currently working on about 30 similar preserve projects throughout the state. Picayune is one of the largest and, some environmentalists say, one of the most important, especially for preserving future drinking water supplies.

"If we are going to support a large number of people, we need to depend on clean water," Stallings said. "We're looking down the road, and we have to set aside and reserve large tracts of land."

Besides helping save drinking water supplies, environmentalists say they hope the state forest will protect the endangered Florida panther and the threatened black bear as well as rare plants such as the cow-horned orchid. The Picayune will be added to 74,000 acres of land in the adjacent Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve.

The department hopes to create a more natural environment for the animals and plants by plugging most of the canals that have drained an area that was once much more marshy.

For humans, the forest preserve might offer hiking, fishing, camping and canoeing. A plan for use of the preserve is expected to be completed in a month, Brett said.

The preserve will nix the push by some residents in the eastern part of Collier County who have been pressuring county officials for more than five years to pave and raise Miller Boulevard extension.

The one-mile, private dirt road runs north off U.S. 41 and connects with the paved part of Miller Boulevard. This area is included in the state forest boundaries.

Supporters say paving Miller Boulevard extension and then building a ramp near the northern section of Miller Boulevard onto I-75 would give them another exit route during a hurricane. But county commissioners did not want to invest in Miller Boulevard extension because it is private.

Stallings said some residents were not concerned about an exit route, but about having the county pay for a road that would have increased their property value.

Despite what some residents consider downsides to the project, state environmentalists say they hope most of the opposition and bad feelings about the state's offer on the land is behind them. They want to move ahead and concentrate on how the forest preserve would benefit the public.

"It's unfortunate that their dreams (for their land) weren't realized, but it's fortunate that we can use the property for doing such good things like the plants, the animals and the recreation," Brett said. "It really is going to go toward serving the human good."