



ESTERO COUNCIL OF
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FEATURE: Creating a Legacy

APPROVAL OF RIVERFRONT LAND PURCHASE MARKS HISTORIC MOMENT FOR THE VILLAGE OF ESTERO

A long-term vision to preserve green space, protect the river, and provide recreational opportunities for generations to come moved one step closer to reality on September 20, 2018 as the Village Council voted unanimously to move forward with a \$24.5 million purchase of 62 acres along the Estero River.

The property extends from the northeast corner of U.S. 41 and Corkscrew Road, north to the Estero United Methodist Church, and east to the railroad tracks. Once belonging to the religious colony of the Koreshans, the last members of the group sold the property to Village Partners in 2007.

Along with two other parcels they had previously purchased, Village Partners planned to build a large mixed-use community — called Estero on the River — around the south Lee County waterway. Lee County zoned the property accordingly, but due to a downfall in the economy, the mixed-use community was never built.

Today, the first land acquisition since the Village’s incorporation opens the pathway for preservation, development, and civic uses



including the creation of a Village Center, a walkable, mixed-use, social downtown for residents and businesses stretching from near Willow Road to just north of Broadway.

The September 20 vote was a culmination of intensive study and gathering of community feedback including a September 5 workshop that generated more than 400 emails and nearly 100 attendees. Of those who attended, many were dressed in green to express their overwhelming support for the

\$24.5 million proposed environmental 62-acre land purchase.

THE VISION

Village Manager Steve Sarkozy reflected that this land purchase will fulfill much of the residents’ 2013 vision to preserve Estero’s unique environment and rich history.

“This plan allows us to reshape this parcel from Lee County’s 2007 rezoning,” said Mr. Sarkozy. “My concern was that the original plan contained a huge amount of density, both commercial and residential. That direction would not characterize our Village in the way we have imagined. Now, instead of building

a 65-foot structure within 75 feet of the river, we will preserve public access to the river, maintain large setbacks, and stay true to our residents’ vision for their Village.”

At the September 5th workshop, Village Manager Steve Sarkozy presented a detailed presentation to the Council and attendees, sharing the strong commitment of the Village to conserve the limited amount of vacant land in the community, and to maximize the benefits of the property to the residents of the Village.

This purchase permits the Village:

- To increase the pedestrian-friendly open space with expansive pathways along the banks of the Estero River,
- To guarantee Estero residents and visitors easy access to the Estero River,
- To preserve some or all of the many heritage trees on the property,
- To integrate this property with the Koreshan State Park and the 100-acre Boomer property just north of the Park on the other side of the Estero River,
- To expand and preserve the long historical heritage of this area and the community,
- To link this land with the prospective civic, cultural, entertainment Village Center building upon the Estero Community Park and likely Estero Bonita bike/pedestrian trail.

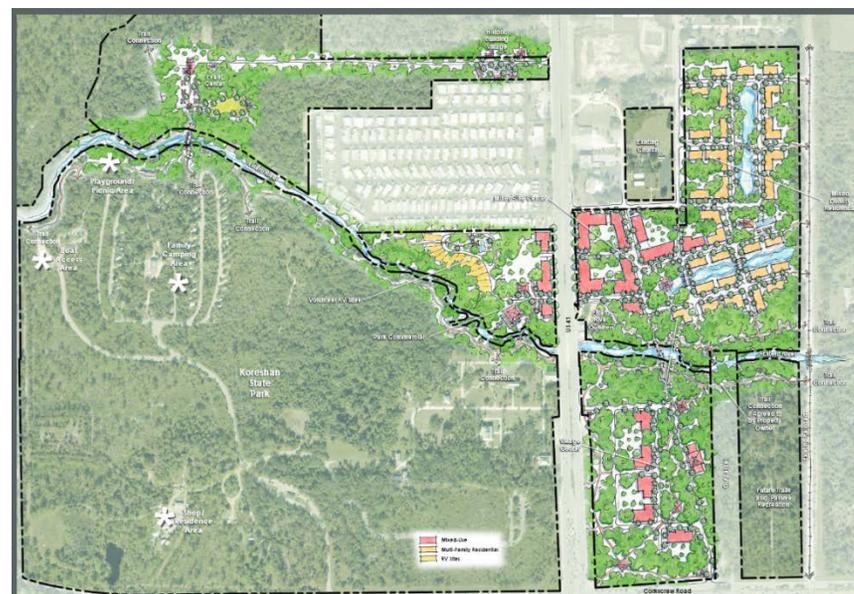


FIGURE 1 POTENTIAL FUTURE USES – VILLAGE OF ESTERO VISION MAP

FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY

In total, the purchase price is \$26 million, including closing costs and expenses for design/development alternatives. This purchase will not deplete reserves, compromise the Village’s ability to respond to natural disasters, jeopardize any other projects in the Capital Improvement Program, of which this land purchase is the largest component, nor impair Village Operations with the recently adopted lower property tax rate.

At a later date, the Village Council will choose an option to fund the purchase. Options include a \$9 million down payment with an annual payment of \$2.7 million and an accelerated plan which would allow Estero to pay off the debt in about seven years.

The Village negotiated the purchase price after obtaining several appraisals and verifying the availability of the necessary funding.

The financial structure will be consistent with the Council's conservative approach to financing, commented Mr. Sarkozy. In addition, the Village is seeking grants and the possible sale of certain parcels. .

THE PLANNERS

Don Eslick, founding chair of the Estero Council of Community Leaders, stressed the importance of seeking an outstanding planner to oversee the development of the property.

“We have experienced an enthusiastic and positive response,” said Mr. Eslick. “This purchase satisfies the goals of the community, and will be a catalyst for the future development of a Village Center.”

Mr. Eslick provided a bit of history on the property.

“A decade ago, there was interest from the private sector to develop both a repertory theater and a community theater,” he explained. “Those plans dissolved due to the recession. Now that the economy has recovered, we hope that private investors will come back in with proposals for civic and cultural projects.”

THE CATALYST

Jim Tatoes, Estero's community planning manager, views the property as a positive catalyst for the entire region. In fact, he says that it's a “miracle” in that it accomplishes such a large part of the Village's original vision.

“This purchase satisfies the goals of the community, and will be a catalyst for the future development of a Village Center.”

“When the Village was first formed, there was a public meeting asking the people what they wanted to see,” Mr. Tatoes shared. “Their comments evolved into a comprehensive land plan that covers a 25 to 30-year vision, including a Village Center concept with parks, recreation, civic functions, walking, hiking, and river access. With this property, we can do this and more.”

Commensurate with the Village leaders' vision to eventually connect this land to the Koreshan State Park , the end goal will be 330 acres of contiguous green space, interconnected possibilities with extraordinary potential. A bridge and an underpass would connect the two properties, alleviating the need for walkers to cross U.S. 41.

Mr. Tatoes mentions that there is additional undeveloped property north of the Hertz campus. He says that no other local city or village has such vast potential, a vision that will give us our own river that goes out into Estero Bay. The railroad adjacent to the property offers an opportunity for extended highway of still unexplored trails and paths for walking and biking. The possibilities seem endless.

“The Village is only three and a half years old and is already financially strong enough to complete this purchase,” continues Mr. Tatooles. “This is significant in that it means that Village staff, the Village Manager and the Council have enabled the Village to grow with control. Proper management has led to visionary growth. None of this could have happened without skillful stewardship by the Village founders and staff.”

Moving forward, Mr. Tatooles emphasizes that this has to be done right. To do so requires that the Village leaders canvas the world for the best land planning consultant, one who can help make Estero a destination city.

We are well on our way, he adds, with new and upcoming healthcare options at Coconut Point, Miromar Development, and other areas of major growth.

Thinking ahead, Mr. Tatooles forecasts that the Village will not use all of the property, the remainder will increase in value, and private developers will want to invest – with the ultimate result being a reduction in debt on the property.

THE SUPPORTERS

The Village has gotten strong endorsements from leaders and members of the Estero Council of Community Leaders, Florida Wildlife Federation, the Estero Bay Buddies, the Happehatchee Center and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

Rob Moher, President and CEO of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida as “saving Old Florida” and announced at the September 5th Workshop that the Happehatchee Center Board of Directors had approached the Conservancy to purchase the Center that is



FIGURE 2 POSSIBLE FUTURE USE VILLAGE OF ESTERO 9/20/18 PRESENTATION

surrounded by the Estero on the River land. The Conservancy expects that to happen within one year. Mr. Moher expressed that they look forward to providing their expertise and working with the Village on this “legacy project.”

At the September 5 workshop, many residents spoke in favor of the purchase with only a single resident speaking against it. When Mayor Boesch asked the crowd to raise a hand if they were in favor of this purchase, all but two people raised their hands.

Village residents lauded Estero officials for pursuing the opportunity, and several Village councilors expressed favorable views on the potential land purchase and what it could mean for Estero.

THE OPPORTUNITY

“Residents have shared with us that this is a golden opportunity and we need to move forward,” stated Mr. Sarkozy. “On the Council side, there were two previous occasions when the councilors decided not to proceed with land purchases presented to them. Their strategy was to defer their first land acquisition until something bigger, better and more environmental along the river came along. And now here it is. This is a result of great collaboration among residents, staff and council. Solid planning with public purpose in mind.”

Mr. Sarkozy added that the Village does not make bold moves like this without community participation.

“This is a compilation of a lot of people’s input,” he concluded.

“We are listening to our residents, to their ideas and their

concerns, and our decisions will reflect the shared vision we have for the Village of Estero.”

Mr. Sarkozy said that Estero will now move forward with contract negotiations to buy the property. Village staff are planning to bring a purchase and sale agreement before the Village Council at a public meeting to take place in October.

For more information about community planning in Estero, visit our website at <http://EsteroToday.com/community-planning/>.