

Williamson County takes steps to buy land for biggest park yet

County would buy 865 acres for \$12.5 million.

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Williamson County commissioners voted Tuesday to spend as much as \$12.5 million on what will be the county's largest park if a contract between the county and the property's owner is approved in coming weeks.

The 865 acres lie north of Liberty Hill and have bluffs with 10-mile views of the county, rolling hills and riverfront property, commissioners said. The sale, which was opposed by two commissioners, had been suggested by the landowner, whose development plans were sidelined by recent problems in the housing market.

"As we continue to grow, having a place to go where you can feel like you're really in nature" is going to be harder to find, said Commissioner Cynthia Long, whose precinct includes the proposed parkland. "I think this will be a crown jewel in the county's parks system."

But not all commissioners agreed. The court voted Tuesday 3-2 to approve the offer, with Commissioners Lisa Birkman and Valerie Covey voting against it.

Covey could not be reached for comment, but Birkman said she opposed putting the bulk of the county's \$22 million park bond money, which voters passed in 2006, into one piece of land.

Doing that, she said, would take away from other park projects, such as spending \$4 million to improve the East Williamson County Regional Park in Taylor, one of several recommendations made by a citizens committee before the bond election.

Birkman also said the parkland near Liberty Hill is 45 minutes away from her precinct and not in a heavily populated part of the county.

Plans for the land have not been made, but commissioners said it probably will have trails and be a place where groups such as Scouts can have camping trips.

County officials have identified Liberty Hill as the next big growth hot spot, going so far as to propose expanding Texas 29 into a six-lane expressway, with as many as six frontage road lanes, that would go through or near Liberty Hill — much to area residents' chagrin.

As part of the parkland's use, 16 acres would be reserved in case a Texas 29 bypass was built north of Liberty Hill, though the county has not yet selected a route for the road.

The county has been eyeing the land for three or four months, after a developer who owns the property approached them about making it into a park.

Joe Birdwell of ASC River Oaks Ranch Ltd. bought the land three years ago and planned to build as many as 1,500 homes on it, priced from the upper \$200,000s to more than \$500,000. Birdwell said he had concept plans for the development and was negotiating ways to get water and wastewater to it, but he put the project on hold because of the declining housing market and decided to contact the county.

He would not say how much he paid for the land, nor would he discuss the offer approved by commissioners Tuesday, except to say he was happy about it.

"It's going to make a really fantastic piece of parkland," Birdwell said. "It's one of the prettiest pieces of riverfront property I've ever owned."

Birdwell is expected to meet with Long and an attorney hired by the county, Charlie Crossfield, to discuss the county's offer and begin negotiating a contract.

County Judge Dan A. Gattis said one could come before the court in the next three or four weeks, if not sooner.

Gattis normally negotiates such contracts with Crossfield, but Gattis said Long was appointed to the job because she was more familiar with the land.

The property was appraised at \$13.2 million by a private appraiser, Long said, but Birdwell told the county that he would be willing to sell the land for less. At an online real estate site, the land was offered for \$16 million.

If a contract is approved, it will be the county's largest park to date.

Now, the Southwest Regional Park near Leander is the largest. It is about 800 acres, and its first phase includes almost a dozen soccer fields as well as basketball and tennis courts.

But Long said the parkland by Liberty Hill will probably be for "passive use," with trails and hiking areas instead of soccer fields or playscapes.

She said the county is moving toward securing more preserves and passive parks because in a survey done last summer, 72 percent of respondents said they wanted more walking, hiking and biking trails.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin