

LEGISLATIVE #

110131B

**City of Gainesville
Environmental Site Evaluation
Flatwoods Additions—Florida Title Group Property**

Introduction

The Florida Title Group property is an 87-acre parcel (#08197-020-003) located in Section 27 of Township 9 south, range 20 east in northeast Gainesville. The City was made aware that the owners are interested in selling the property, and City staff conducted an evaluation to determine the property's potential value as public conservation/passive recreational land. This evaluation is based on available GIS data and historic aerial photos, as well as visits to the site on April 12 and April 15, 2010.

Natural Communities

Mesic/Wet Flatwoods

The majority of the property consists of mesic to wet flatwoods, which vary in their structure and general condition. Parts of the property have been logged in the recent past, and have naturally regenerating slash pine with few mature trees. Other areas, particularly on the northern edge of the property, have a relatively healthy stand structure of widely spaced mature slash and longleaf pine. Although a few charred stumps and a plowline in the southern part of the property indicate that a wildfire burned through a small portion of the property at one time, there is otherwise little evidence of fire. Due to the general absence of fire, a significant number of water oaks and sweetgum trees have grown up into the canopy and subcanopy in many places, and the shrub layer is extremely dense. Herbaceous groundcover, normally a key component of flatwoods communities, is largely absent from most of the property, likely due to soil disturbance and fire exclusion.

Basin Swamp

A large basin swamp lies on the northern edge of the property, which was once part of a larger wetland that extended to the north side of 39th Avenue. This wetland receives stormwater input from NE 39th Avenue but apparently is no longer connected to the remainder of the basin on the north side of the road. Water appears to have flowed into this swamp from the southwest, via a natural stream or slough which in the 1960s was channelized and re-routed around the swamp to the south and east. This swamp is dominated by pond cypress with some swamp tupelo. Groundcover consists of ferns and sedges, with scattered wetland shrubs growing on hummocks. At the time of the site visits, a large area in the center of this swamp had standing water.

Dome Swamp

Several small dome swamps are scattered throughout the property. They have been logged in the past, although pond cypress has regenerated. Swamps at the southern edge of the property appear to have a reduced hydroperiod, with heavy encroachment of upland species and little evidence of recent flooding. Farther north in the property, saturated soils and standing water are more common and swamps are dominated by wetland species. Where groundcover is present, it generally consists of ferns such as *Woodwardia virginica*.

Blackwater Stream

Water that naturally flowed through this property was rerouted into artificial channels in the 1960s. The associated wetlands therefore have been drastically altered, and much of the natural process of flood attenuation and water quality treatment that the wetlands

provided can no longer occur. The ditching of the creeks, in conjunction with the increase in impervious surfaces south and west of the property, has likely also increased the volume of water flowing through the creeks during storm events. Although they do provide some wildlife habitat, these creeks function primarily as conduits carrying stormwater, debris, and pollutants into the Hatchett Creek system and eventually to Newnan's Lake.

Listed/Rare Species

Due to a lack of fire management, the diversity of this site is relatively low; however, a few noteworthy species were found during site visits. Hooded pitcherplant, (*Sarracenia rubra* Threatened—DACS) was found in one location, and cinnamon fern and royal fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea* and *O. regalis*, respectively; Commercially Exploited—DACS) are widespread in wet areas. An adult Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*; G5S3) was observed and, based on behavior, was likely breeding on the property. What appeared to be an active burrow of a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*, G3S3, Threatened—FFWCC) was also located, although based on the soils onsite, even with proper management it is very unlikely that this property could support a significant tortoise population.

Surrounding Land Use and Connectivity

This property shares approximately 2100 feet of boundary with the City of Gainesville's Flatwoods Conservation Area, which lies directly to the east and is managed by the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department. South of the property is a small City-owned park containing tennis courts, a small parking area, and some playground equipment; the remainder of the southern boundary is residential and industrial land use separated from the property by NE 31st Avenue. A ditched creek and electric transmission lines run along part of the west boundary, and to the west of the property are churches and a small City-owned parcel which contains an electrical substation but is otherwise undeveloped. North of the property is NE 39th Avenue, which in this area is a divided four-lane road. Across 39th Avenue to the north of the property are vacant forested properties and the City-owned Ironwood Golf Course.

Management Considerations

Flatwoods, which make up a large portion of this property, are heavily dependent on fire to maintain composition and structure; long term management of healthy flatwoods on this property would require frequent use of prescribed fire. However, heavy shrub growth would likely make reintroduction of fire into this area a challenge, and the accumulated duff layer could present smoke management problems and pose a risk to the remaining mature pines. Given these challenges and the proximity of the property to smoke sensitive areas and two major roads, regular use of prescribed fire might not be possible. Instead, mechanical treatments of the shrub layer would probably be necessary to reduce wildfire risk and improve habitat for native species.

Invasive plant infestations on the property were surprisingly limited, with most invasive plants associated with roadsides or the ditched creek. The only noteworthy population found during site visits was an infestation of air potato along the property's northwest boundary.

Access to this property for management or passive recreation could be via the existing parking area near the active park at the south end of the property, the existing Flatwoods Conservation Area parking lot, or via the berms along the ditched creek. There are likely

to be enough uplands on the property to support an official trail system, and existing ditch berms and mountain bike trails already appear to be regularly used.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although there would be some ecological and recreational benefits to acquiring the Florida Title Group property, there are also factors that make it less attractive as a potential acquisition. The property is moderately large, contains a substantial amount of wetlands and a ditched creek, and its acquisition would significantly expand a City-owned conservation area. However, the property's wetland and upland natural communities have been degraded to the point where restoration would be required, which reduces the property's ecological value. Hydrological restoration could have significant benefits both on-and offsite, but would be costly. Restoration and fire management of the flatwoods communities, while not impossible, would be challenging given the property's current condition as well as its location and surrounding land uses.

This property is adjacent to Flatwoods Conservation Area, which is one of the city's least visited nature parks, probably due to its location in a mostly industrial area. A potential benefit of protecting lands adjacent to existing nature parks is as a buffer from development. However, there is some uncertainty about the future management of Flatwoods Conservation Area due to its proximity to the Gainesville Regional Airport's runways. Because of this uncertainty and the fact that the natural areas at Flatwoods Conservation Area are degraded and have few if any listed species, the value of this property as a buffer is less than it if it were adjacent to a more intact, diverse natural area. Furthermore, the extensive amount of wetlands on the Florida Title Group property reduces the risk that it will be developed in the short term, although development may occur if it is not acquired for conservation.

Overall, although there are potential benefits of acquiring this property, there would be management challenges, and overall the property has relatively low species diversity, as does Flatwoods Conservation Area. For these reasons the Florida Title Group property would rank behind several other properties currently under consideration for acquisition.