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Developers' offers in hand, Pinellas Schools gives nonprofit time to buy forest

A group of neighbors formed the WK Preservation Group nonprofit in March to save 14 acres of untouched forest on Klosterman Road. They must give the district a report on their progress by fall.



Brad Husserl, 60, of Tarpon Springs, top, leads Tex Carter, 68, of Tarpon Spring, Don Richter, 64, of Palm Harbor and Kay Carter, 68, Tarpon Springs as they walk along a trail Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020 in Tarpon Springs. A group of local residents formed a nonprofit called WK Preservation Group Inc. in March in order to save the approximate 14 acres of land located along Klosterman Road in Tarpon Springs. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

By **Tracey McManus**

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TARPON SPRINGS — When Pinellas County Schools put 14 acres of untouched forest on Klosterman Road up for sale in January, housing developers pounced. The highest of four bidders offered \$3.3 million.

Since buying the land in 1990, the school district never found a use for it, so for decades the woods have been an oasis of natural Florida along this suburban border of Tarpon Springs and Palm Harbor.

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The potential sale came as a surprise to neighbors. Don Richter, a cancer nurse and former firefighter who lives across the street, only learned about it after the bidding window closed in February, when he saw a group of officials huddled outside the chain link fence and asked what they were up to.

He made flyers calling for action, and within days about a dozen residents met to strategize. Within weeks seven neighbors formed the nonprofit [WK Preservation Group](#), determined to buy and conserve the property forever.

After meetings with WK Preservation President Tex Carter in March, school district officials agreed to sit on the offers from developers, giving the residents time to come up with the money to buy the property themselves.

Associate Superintendent Clint Herbic said Pinellas Schools would like to see WK Preservation succeed in its effort to preserve the 14 acres as greenspace but noted the district cannot give them an indefinite time frame. The district expects a status update by the fall, making Klosterman Road the latest battleground for preservation in the state's most densely populated county.

"We know we have to move quickly or this is a done deal," said Kay Carter, WK Preservation treasurer. "You can't un-ring a bell, and that's what would happen here."



Brad Husserl, 60, of Tarpon Springs, left Don Richter, 64, of Palm Harbor, second from left, Kay Carter, 68, Tarpon Springs, second from right, listen as Kay's husband Tex, 68, speaks Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020 in Tarpon Springs. The group formed a nonprofit called WK Preservation Group Inc. in March in order to save the approximate 14 acres of land located along Klosterman Road in Tarpon Springs. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

The Klosterman Road Property sits about 1,000 feet east of the Gulf of Mexico and directly south of the Mariner's Point Management Area, 76 acres of non-public access land Pinellas County has conserved for three decades.

Craig Huegel, a wildlife biologist who teaches at St. Petersburg College and University of Tampa, said the 14 acres are "of utmost ecological significance" because they are some of the last remaining native sandhill and scrub vegetation in the county.

The upland terrain is home to the threatened gopher tortoise, nine-banded armadillo, black racer and a vast variety of birds and plant species, including a small number of state-endangered giant air plants, according to an analysis Huegel conducted for WK Preservation.

In an interview, Huegel described the opportunity to combine these 14 acres with the adjacent 76-acre conservation area as "once in a lifetime."

"If it gets developed, it's gone," said Huegel, who also worked as director of the county's environmental lands division until 2004. "We've built on just about every inch of Pinellas County. Being able to protect examples of what Pinellas County has in terms of natural habitats, plants and animals, and giving them a protected place where they can survive in the future, is a significant thing."

But the uplands are also ideal for developers, as the sandhill and scrub terrain eliminates much of the need for fill dirt.

It's one of the rare developable greenspaces left in Pinellas, which are ever-growing targets for builders.

A developer has applied for a (still pending) land use change to construct 273 homes on the 96-acre Tides Golf Club in Seminole. On November's ballot, Clearwater voters will be asked whether the city should lease most of The Landings Golf Club's 77 acres for a developer to build a light manufacturing complex. And last year, a developer successfully requested Tarpon Springs annex 44 acres of woods into the city, which will allow him to build twice as many homes than if the property had remained in the unincorporated county.

Herbic said once WK Preservation submits a proposal, staff can make a recommendation to the school board, whose members will have the final vote on which offer to select.

In 2018, the school district offered to sell the 14 acres to Pinellas County for a park, so Herbic said preservation has always been a goal. And school officials can select a lower offer if the deal is in the best interest of the public.

But the closer WK Preservation gets to the \$3 million to \$3.3 million range of bids already on the table, "the more attractive their offer would become," Herbic said.

"We thought it was a unique opportunity to work with the community and give them a chance," Herbic said. "But we're not going to drag this out forever, so we do need to come to a resolution."



A woodpecker is seen on a limb in the Klosterman Persevere Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020 in Tarpon Springs. A group of local residents formed a nonprofit called WK Preservation Group Inc. in March in order to save the approximate 14 acres of land located along Klosterman Road in Tarpon Springs. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

Before Richter posted his flyers throughout the neighborhood alerting residents of the potential sale, most of WK Preservation's future members had never met.

But over weeks of meetings at clubhouses and virtually over Zoom at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, neighbors shared their professional backgrounds and life experiences to come up with a game plan.

"With climate change coming, we need this," Kay Carter said. "If people actually pursue something ... we can make a difference in our environment."

There has been no public access to the 14 acres. But the residents are protective of what they call an "ancient forest" in their neighborhood and its position next to the county's 76 acres of conservation land.

WK Preservation board chair Brad Husserl, an architect, has watched a pair of fish hawks return to feed at the 14 acres for years and listens to a great horned owl there on cool nights. It is home to songbirds and bobcats, and walking through it can feel like traveling back in time to native Florida.

"If I get a chance to save something like this, I'm going to fight for that," Husserl said.

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President Tex Carter, who spent 50 years in construction and development of industrial plants, airports and other industry before retiring to Tarpon Springs with his wife, Kay, said the nonprofit is pursuing state grants to fund most of the purchase.

They are also seeking private donations and have so far brought in about \$12,000, Carter said. To raise interest, the group is calling for \$50,000 in donations to raffle off a carving by Tarpon Springs woodworker Ken D'Ambrosio.



The gate to an approximately 14 acre plot of land is seen Wednesday, Aug. 12, 2020 in Tarpon Springs. A group of neighbors formed a nonprofit in March to save the preserve off of Klosterman Road. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

The group's ultimate goal is to donate the property to Pinellas County, but that arrangement is also pending. Parks and Conservation Resources Director Paul Cozzie said the county did not buy the 14 acres when the school district offered it 2018, because it ranked low on a list of about 60 properties the county is tracking for acquisition and preservation due to price and location.

The county has dedicated \$15 million in Penny for Pinellas sales tax revenue to acquire property for preservation over the next 10 years.

Of Pinellas County's 175,000 acres, there are about 21,000 acres of county parks, trails and environmental lands like Brooker Creek Preserve and the Mariner's Point management area.

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Logistics, including how much it would cost the county annually to maintain the Klosterman Road property if it accepted the donation, must still be determined, Cozzie said. But in the meantime, Cozzie said the county is willing to contribute staff expertise to WK Preservation in its grant writing, a process that can overwhelm many grassroots groups.

Ultimately, this group of neighbors turned activists do not plan to stop at the Klosterman Road property. Their goal is to use the experience to help preserve other threatened lands, from golf courses to woods.

"Once we succeed, it graduates from just not in my backyard kind of thing, and it becomes a global interest," Carter said.

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CLARIFICATION: In reference to the statement in this article "Their goal is to use the experience to help preserve other threatened lands, from golf courses to woods," the WK Preserve Group's only interest in golf courses is to preserve abandoned golf courses from being transformed into residential and/ or commercial properties. These properties should remain as natural as possible.