

Turnbull Creek Land Preservation Committee October 5, 2020

Members present: Donna Ahearn, Cathleen Planson, Chip Weston, and Katies Tripp. Absent: Lamont Ingalls. The meeting was led by Brian Fields, Asst. City Manager. Rebecca Perry representing the North Florida Land Trust also participated.

After extensive discussion, the Committee unanimously (4 – 0) recommended that the City Commission proceed with the purchase of the 10-acre Sea Star property located on the south side of SR 44 for the negotiated price of \$1.2 million. Under the terms of the Option Agreement, the City has until October 30 to decide to purchase the property. At the June 23, 2020 City Commission meeting, the Commission approved the Option Agreement and directed staff to proceed with the due diligence activities necessary to prepare for the purchase. Funding is available. The City received \$3.576 M from the Turnbull Trace grant. Assuming the sale goes through, there will be approximately \$8.9 million dollars left from the Turnbull bond initiative for future environmental land purchases.

The subject property owned by Sea Star Realty LLC consists of three parcels having a combined total area of 10.08-acres. The property is currently undeveloped and is located between AutoZone and KFC on SR44. The site contains a total of five wetland areas, two upland cut ditches, and portions of Turnbull Creek. The uplands are characterized by a mixture of hardwoods and slash pine, while the wetlands are characterized as mixed wetland hardwood systems. Out of the 10.08 total acres, approximately 2.6 acres are wetlands, based on the St. Johns River Water Management District's approved wetland determination. The property has a thick tree canopy including a number of specimen and historic trees.

City staff completed extensive research and had two appraisals made with comps, and the title is clear. Both appraisals were higher than the agreed purchase price. The owner had created a site plan for development of the property, but the plans had not yet gone through the approval process, so this purchase will stop the property from being commercially developed. Although there was discussion about the cost of the property, because of the 5+ acres of uplands and the location, there was consensus to go ahead with the purchase for the agreed price.

There were extensive discussions regarding different types of easements, including the ones controlled by FDOT on SR 44. The Committee asked staff to research ownership of all associated drainage easements as it will be imperative to open the entire length of the Creek for better water flow. Having a clear understanding of who is responsible for maintaining drainage easements and estimating the annual cost is of critical portance to improving the quality of the Creek and its wetlands. Staff will also ask the Commission to consider the expenditure of bond funds for negotiating purchase of environmental easements for the Creek properties that will remain in private ownership.

It was noted that because of its location along SR 44, this 10+ acre property has the potential to become a welcome area/passive park that can showcase ancient history, the Turnbull History, the Sugar Mill history, the Creek run, the flora and fauna, and the protection of the natural environment.

Staff suggested two ways to legally protect the bond purchased properties. One is through deed restrictions controlled by the City and the other would be through third-party enforcement that could force lands that were not kept in their natural state to revert to a land trust.

Staff is now researching the potential purchase of properties south of the Sea Star property.

The Committee asked for a workshop with the Commission that would deal with an extensive list of questions and opportunities for the next phase of the Turnbull Creek Bond initiative.