

Land swap leads to new park opportunity

County hopes to create 500-acre recreation mecca outside Leiper's Fork

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LEIPER'S FORK — Could more than 500 acres of land near Leiper's Fork become Williamson County's version of Nashville's beloved Percy Warner Park?

That's the possibility county Parks Director Doug Hood wants to explore after a years-in-the-making land swap between Franklin and Williamson County was finalized this week.

The future park land, known as the "Franklin Springs property" because of its numerous bubbling natural springs, was once the source for the city's water supply.

Now that bucolic land could offer a full palette of recreation choices for park lovers. Horseback riding, mountain biking, trail rides, camping, and perhaps even a manmade lake for fishing are all options that Hood said he wants to explore. And he wants input from residents.

"Nothing's off the table," Hood said. "This is going to be an exciting project."

It would be the largest county-owned park. Fairview's Bowie Nature Park, which is more than 720 acres, is the largest park in the county.

Exchange clears way

Hood's work began after County Mayor Rogers Anderson and city Mayor Tom Miller signed an agreement to exchange property, ending years of delays for a project that's promising to both government bodies. The signing ceremony was part of Anderson's 2007 "State of the County" speech Tuesday before members of the Williamson County/Franklin Chamber of Commerce at Franklin Marriott at Cool Springs hotel.

The county got the Franklin Springs property in the trade, while the city got two former jails on Bridge Street, about six acres on Eddy

Lane that backs up to Ft. Granger, and the historic post office building at Five Points.

Aside from being highly visible, city officials coveted all of the properties because of their value.

Back in the 1990s, the two-story post office building appraised for about \$350,000, according to city records. A recent appraisal put its value at \$3.8 million.

Franklin Alderman Dan Klatt said the city's first priority should be figuring out how to use the building as a possible visitors center. He wants it to remain a post office, saying it's "an integral part of business downtown."

City transfer could be thorny

But how and when that happens might be complicated. Because the Springs property was owned through the city's Water and Sewer Fund, the newly acquired properties remain in that fund. For the city to use the property for general, public purposes, city officials must approve buying those properties through a transaction between the water fund and the general fund.

As long as the properties are dormant or rented out, no transaction is necessary between funds, said Russ Truell, assistant city administrator.

How any transaction might affect city water and sewer customers remained unclear.

Alderman Dana McLendon, chairman of the city's Public Enterprise Advisory Committee, suggested that such a move could be difficult to make.

"How does the Water and Sewer Fund convey these properties to the (city's) general fund, and at what price?" he asked.

For now, any money that the city would receive from rent or sales of the properties would go into the water fund.

State park is possibility

The Heritage Foundation of Franklin and Williamson County currently has its offices in the Five Points post office building.

Klatt said there is a possibility that the city could sell some of the properties but thinks that shouldn't happen until after the October election, when at least three new aldermen will be elected.

Anderson said there is no money in this year's budget to even begin designing a new county park. He said the next six months will be a period to share ideas and suggestions.

Meantime, county schools officials will move their maintenance department from the old jail to a new facility that should get under construction in October and take about 14 months to complete, said Carol Birdsong, schools spokeswoman.

Gov. Phil Bredesen announced last fall that he wants to create a new state park in Middle Tennessee and has crews looking for a potential site in Hickman, Maury and Williamson counties. After that announcement, Anderson said, with the county getting more than 500 acres "it only enhances our position of getting a state park here."

On Wednesday, Anderson said he has not spoken to Bredesen about that possibility.