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Greenspace

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Local citizen groups will become more involved in advising the county about greenspace purchases if commissioners tweak the process for choosing and buying additional greenspace land, as they are expected to in April.

About 11 percent of Clarke County is already in protected greenspace - greenways, parks and some private land that meets open-space requirements in subdivisions - but the local government's aim is to eventually protect 20 percent of the county, planner Bruce Lonnee told ACC Commissioners at a Mar. 14 work session. That figure was suggested by a state greenspace acquisition program several years ago, he said, and "it's one that we're going to carry forward."

If the changes are approved, county staffers will rank properties according to 11 program goals and a measure of how critical each property is to a specific program; they'll then seek feedback from an advisory group that includes the Athens Land Trust, Oconee Rivers Land Trust, Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission, Georgia Environmental Policy Institute and Sandy Creek Nature Center. The general public can also suggest land for the county to acquire, Lonnee said.

The county's "greenway network" of connecting footpaths (and travel corridors for wildlife) will be extended, and protecting farmland is also a priority, Lonnee said. Other goals include erosion and flood protection and preservation of historic and cultural sites.

"What constrains us all is the willingness of people to part with their property," Lonnee said. County staffers want more flexibility in purchasing specific properties, so that they can negotiate for any of several top-ranked properties rather than exhaust all efforts to purchase one particular piece of land, he said. Property owners do sometimes raise the asking price when they know the county is interested in their land, Leisure Services Administrator Mike Wharton told *Flagpole*. That's not common, he said - but not unusual either. "They think that you can pay them anything."

But the county must budget scarce taxpayer money, Wharton said, and usually there are alternatives to buying any specific piece of land - like routing a trail along adjacent lands, or even along a road.

And while ACC Commissioners have the power to force a sale, "it would have to be absolutely compelling before the commissioners would even consider it," he said.

On the other hand, some property owners - including State Senator Brian Kemp - have voluntarily sold land to the county at reduced prices, and there can be tax advantages for doing so, Wharton pointed out. But landowners can also contribute to greenspace preservation, water quality and wildlife habitat “just by how they manage their own property,” he said.

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