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2 messages

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Recession has helped counties stock up on preserve space
With housing bubble's burst, land has become cheaper

By Robert Channick, Special to the Tribune
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[PHOTO] Carpenter Ron Miller hammers planks in place for the roof of a new picnic shelter at Blackwell Forest Preserve, which the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County is expanding and restoring. (Chuck Berman, Chicago Tribune / January 19, 2011)

They may be stewards of open spaces, but Chicago-area forest preserve officials are doing a lot of closing these days.

Buying everything from stalled residential developments to golf courses, cash-rich districts are bulking up during the real estate meltdown, adding key parcels in an effort to stave off suburban sprawl.

"We did take advantage of the downturn in the economy to aggressively pursue land that we had identified years ago, that we never thought that we would be able to acquire or afford," said Tom Hahn, executive director of the Lake County Forest Preserve District. "We were able to do both."

Lake County, which lost ground to rampant development during the real estate boom, was one of a number of area forest preserve districts to ask voters for help in acquiring dwindling open spaces.

Flush with \$185 million from a 2008 bond sale, the district went on a buying spree, gobbling up some 3,400 acres of land. The second-largest forest preserve system in the state at 29,300 acres, the 53-year old district has grown by nearly 12 percent since the onset of the recession.

"We spent down the money quicker than we had anticipated, mainly because there were so many good buying opportunities for us in 2009 and 2010, especially," Hahn said.

In October, the district picked up a 185-acre parcel near Antioch for \$39,000 an acre — a third less than the pre-recession asking price. Part of a 780-acre assemblage known as the Dutch Gap Forest Preserve, it helped link the nascent Prairie Stream and Pine Dunes forest preserves into a contiguous open space of more than 1,500 acres.

Founded in 1971, the McHenry County Conservation District has essentially doubled over the last decade to just less than 25,000

acres. In 2007, voters approved the sale of \$73 million in bonds, which were used to acquire nearly 4,000 acres. Though the bond proceeds have been exhausted, about \$3.6 million in accumulated interest remains, which should bring in an additional 200 to 600 acres this year, officials said.

Among the key parcels acquired is the Lake in the Hills Fen Conservation Area, a 230-acre site adjacent to a state nature preserve. Restoration work has been ongoing and the site will open to the public in April.

The district's buying power has not gone unnoticed by increasingly desperate sellers.

"The district does receive lots of telephone calls about interested individuals that want to sell their property," said Elizabeth Kessler, executive director. "It's a buyer's market."

Though the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County's biggest growth spurt was in the 1970s, the 25,000-acre district managed to add some 2,400 acres over the last decade. Voters approved a bond sale in 2006 that provided the district with \$68 million for land acquisition and habitat restoration.

Those proceeds have helped the district renovate and expand the 1,350-acre Blackwell Forest Preserve in Warrenville, a former quarry that was acquired in the 1960s. Plans include a fishing pond, archery range, trailhead access and an adjacent urban stream research center along the West Branch of the DuPage River and Springbrook Tributary.

"It's been a great time for us to buy property," said Bill Weidner, spokesman for the 96-year-old district. "There's just not a lot of major, large parcels of property left to acquire."

Other districts have not been as well-positioned to take advantage of the downturn.

Racing the clock against development in one of the fastest-growing counties in the country, the Forest Preserve District of Will County has added about 8,300 acres since 1999, increasing its holdings by about two-thirds to nearly 21,000 acres. Funded by two bond sales, the district had \$134 million for land acquisition, most of which was spent before the recession hit. Only \$1 million of the proceeds remained as of January, officials said.

"If we would have known, obviously, that the economy would have acted the way it did, then that would have maybe taken some of the urgency off, but we didn't have that crystal ball," said Bruce Hodgdon, district spokesman.

In 2009, the Will County district acquired 198 acres of wooded farmland to create Donohue Grove Preserve in the southwest corner of the county. The property had been amassed by a developer who planned to build a high-end residential subdivision before homebuilding ground to a halt. The district paid about \$24,000 an acre — a 50 percent markdown from its pre-recession price.

Though tantalizing bargains abound, the district is hesitant to ask voters for more funding.

"I don't think it's the right time," Executive Director Marcy DeMauro said. "This economic slump we're in has hit Will County hard. People are struggling. There's a very strong anti-tax sentiment."

Established in 1914, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County is the state's largest district at 68,277 acres. Limited at its inception to 75,000 acres, the district might take some time to get there, having added just 835 acres and grown by a modest 1.2 percent since 2000.

Without benefit of a bond measure, the Cook County district sat on the sidelines and built up a \$25 million real estate war chest through much of the last decade. The district recently began revisiting a number of long-coveted properties, and is in negotiations to acquire some 320 acres this year, with another 400 acres on its wish list, officials said.

"In the early 2000s, when the real estate market was hot, we weren't participating in too many deals because we were getting outbid," said Christopher Adas, the district's real estate agent.

The district's largest acquisition in 2010 was the 55-acre Rolling Knolls Country Club near Elgin, a private, 18-hole golf course and banquet facility. The district paid about \$5.75 million for a property that had been marketed at more than \$8 million before the recession, district officials said. Though long-term plans are up in the air, the district will continue running the property as a golf course on a trial basis.

The timing has been more fortuitous in Kane County, where the Forest Preserve District has added nearly 12,000 acres since 1999, increasing its holdings by 170 percent. Voters approved three measures between 1999 and 2007, raising \$230 million to help fund the acquisitions.

Among its key additions, the district in 2008 created the 741-acre Brunner Family Forest Preserve along the Fox River near Carpentersville. The largest single-owner property ever acquired by the district, it links two existing preserves to protect 1,000 acres of uninterrupted shoreline.

Riding the momentum, an emboldened district board agreed last week to ask voters for another \$30 million for land acquisition through an April referendum. Forest preserve board President John Hoscheit said dramatically reduced land prices on long-targeted parcels prompted commissioners to "keep the program going, but reduce the size of it."

Emblematic of the times, trees are few and far between at one of the Lake County Forest Preserve District's biggest recent purchases: a vacant, 103,000-square-foot office building in Libertyville that will serve as the new headquarters for the rapidly expanding district. Built in 1999, the former high-tech complex will consolidate district operations that are scattered over eight rustic homes and barns throughout the county.

"We were able to buy, basically, a \$20 million office building for \$4 million," Hahn said.

Freelance reporters Clifford Ward and Elizabeth Owens-Schiele

contributed to this report.

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The path to McHenry's great escapes

By HILARY GOWINS - hgowins@nwherald.com

NW Herald

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[PHOTO] Sarah Rummel (left), associate landscape architect and Amy Peters (right), planning and development manager look out over the pond at the Winding Creek conservation area in Hebron. (Lauren M. Anderson – landerson@nwherald.com)

WOODSTOCK – More than three years after it received \$73 million in bond money, the McHenry County Conservation District has acquired 3,882 acres and appropriated \$18.9 million for the fiscal year 2010-11.

“When we originally sought the referendum, we were at 20,964 acres, which was 5 percent of the land in McHenry County,” MCCD Executive Director Elizabeth S. Kessler said.

That total has reached 24,846 acres. This number still falls short of Lake County Forest Preserve's total of 29,276 acres.

MCCD Director of Finance Andy Dylak explained that the district had made the voter-approved bond money go a long way.

Dylak said the spending of the bond money was broken down into three categories.

The district designated \$62.5 million for land acquisition, and all of that money has been spent to obtain 3,882 acres of open space.

However, since its issuance, the bond money has earned \$4.9 million in interest, and \$3.6 million of that money remains unspent. Officials anticipate that it will be used toward further land acquisition in 2011.

The second designation is for the development and improvements of current sites and trails, for which \$8.5 million was set aside.

“This basically refers to developing sites to allow for better public access and enjoyment by adding shelters, picnic areas, parking areas,” Dylak said. “It also includes creating both multi-use paved and natural unpaved trails.”

About \$5.3 million remains and is expected to be used in 2011.

For the restoration of natural areas and natural habitats, \$2 million was set aside, and about \$705,113 remains in district coffers.

As far as land acquisition, which took up an overwhelming majority of

the targeted spending, MCCD aimed to get 4,500 new acres.

Kessler thinks that the remaining 618 acres needed to meet that goal can be acquired in 2011.

"The district does not disclose areas in consideration but looks at last remaining high-quality natural areas and areas adjacent to current properties," Kessler said.

Planning and Development Manager Amy Peters said that 2010 boasted many highlights for the district's accomplishments.

"We were able to improve one of the district's oldest sites, the Nippersink Canoe Base up in the Spring Grove area," Peters said. "It's a small site, but it needed some attention since it was one of our oldest sites.

"We took out an asphalt parking lot and put in porous pavers, upgraded and redid the water access for the canoe stop and launch, and opened up the view by clearing out some invasive brush. It was a great accomplishment to improve something we already had."

A new addition to the district was at the Kishwaukee Headwaters in Woodstock. It's a new property for MCCD, but has a long history as part of a collaborative effort between the city of Woodstock, McHenry County Soil and Water Conservation, the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County and the district.

"It's a beautifully restored prairie with a hiking and picnic area, picnic shelter and a couple of observation points of rolling topography," Peters said. "It's actually the headwaters of the Kishwaukee River; that's why it is important and protected."

Peters said there was an elevated wooden boardwalk that extended down through the wetland area.

This year will see continued openings to the public, said MCCD Communications Manager Wendy Kummerer.

What's next

A dedication for the Lake in the Hills Fen Conservation Area is set for April 16 at 1500 Jefferson St., Lake in the Hills.

A dedication and woodland hike will take place at the High Point Conservation Area, MCCD's newest site, at 10250 Reese Road, Harvard, from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday, May 7.
