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Seminoles Buy Area Site for \$13.2 Mil.

By JEREMY MAREADY
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The Seminole Tribe of Florida has purchased 752 acres of land in North Lakeland for \$13.2 million. The land is east of Moore Road and northwest of USA International Speedway. It was purchased from Harper Properties Inc., which is owned by Robert Harper IV. Harper Properties had bought the property Dec. 5 for \$9.5 million from Lakeland NE Holdings LLC. That same day, he sold it to the tribe, according to Polk County property records.



(The Ledger)

Robert Harper IV on Tuesday declined to comment.

The deal will not bring any immediate development to the area, Gary Bitner, a spokesman for the Seminole Tribe, said.

"There is no definite plan with what the tribe plans to do with the land," Bitner said. "Frequently, the tribe buys and sells land without ever developing it. That is certainly the possibility here."

Landowners on Moore Road had heard the tribe would bring in a casino or an exotic animal hunting lodge.

But Bitner refuted both rumors.

"This will definitely not be a game reserve," he said. "And there is almost no way a casino can be built on land that is not on reservation land."

"It's almost impossible for a tribe to do that. I would say there is no possibility for that," Bitner said.

According to county records, the land is zoned low-density residential and is in the Polk City Special Protection Area, which falls under the protection of the Green Swamp Area of Critical Concern.

"It was designated as a special protection area by the Florida Department of Community Affairs," said Bernadette Fisher, a Polk County planner.

"Basically, we are trying to protect the water out there," she said.

Most of the land is zoned to hold one home per 10 or 20 acres.

"You have to have a lot of land to have development out there," she said.

The deal closes the tribe's search for land in Polk.

About four years ago, officials from the tribe had approached Dean Saunders, owner and broker of Coldwell Banker Commercial Saunders Real Estate in Lakeland, to find property in Polk.

"I showed them a bunch of pieces of property," he said.

"At the time, it was the Tampa group that was looking, but I was dealing with people in Fort Lauderdale. But then they went cold on me, Saunders said.

"But, knowing the area there, it fits all the parameters for what they told me they were looking for," he added.

Bitner did say that, in the far future, the land could be built out as low-density residential development.

The tribe has built several communities like that in other areas of the state.

"This is not going to be built as a large master planned community," he said. "That's not the tribe's intent. I think you could classify this as an investment with the possibility of low-density residential development."

Jeremy Maready can be reached at 863-802-7592 or jeremy.maready@theledger.com.
