

ISLANDS

FROM A1

Shores Mayor Tom Cadden said he and Town Attorney Chester Clem had a two-hour meeting with Lost Tree President Charles Bayer Jr. and Cox in Cox's Vero Beach office Tuesday evening over other matters Cadden declined to describe.

"They took the opportunity to sign the contract while we were at that meeting," Cadden said.

"I would also like to thank Mrs. (Helen) Stone for agreeing to the sale," Cadden said. "She deserves a lot of credit for doing it."

Stone owns Lost Tree and is the daughter of the corporation's founder, Liwyd Eccelstone.

No company representatives were at Wednesday's public announcement at the county building.

"I wouldn't read anything into it," Cox said of the company's absence.

The contract pledges \$15.1 million to buy the six islands: \$1.08 million each from city and town; \$8.08 million from Indian River County; and \$4.87 million from the Florida Communities Trust.

A land survey and other details for closing on the sale must be completed by Feb. 12 to ensure the state contribution, said Matt Sexton, Florida real estate director for The Conservation Fund, a not-for-profit group that negotiated the contract.

"The way everyone came together and partnered was outstanding," Sexton said.

Cadden also praised state Sen. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, and former Republican state Rep. Charles Sembler of Sebastian for helping get the state's contribution.

"Fifty years from now (the islands) will still be there" County Commissioner Caroline Ginn said. "They'll still be pristine ... It's the greatest Christmas present I can imagine."

The islands are largely covered with exotic pepper trees and Australian pines, which the county plans to remove and replace with native vegetation.

The most recent proposal for building on the islands, floated in 2001, was for 44 homes on three islands nearest shore and an 18-hole golf course on three islands farther out in the water.

"Pelican Island Audubon Society is thrilled," said its president, Jens Trippon, later Wednesday. "Mainly it's going to help the Indian River lagoon. We won't have the impact of the runoff from a golf course or houses."

Lost Tree has proposed several different development plans for its islands since the late 1980s. At that time, zoning would have allowed several residences per acre.

That ended in the early 1990s, when city and town changed population density on the islands to one home per five acres. It was done after the state Department of Community Affairs rejected earlier municipal plans that would have allowed more homes on the uninhabited islands.

Lost Tree failed in its administrative challenge to the validity of those land-use plans.

Lost Tree also went to court claiming the tract of land surrounding three of its islands was farther east than shown in county record

books — so far east that it touched the main barrier island where the company wanted to build a bridge.

While that legal action was being contested by state lawyers, some of the barrier island neighbors whose yards were overlapped by Lost Tree's new survey sued the company.

The sales contract announced Wednesday is designed to vacate or settle all those lawsuits.

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