

Opinion

EDITORIALS

Viewpoints of the Press Journal

Two down, two to go

County commissioners should agree today to move the dispute over Lost Tree Islands a third step closer to settlement.

The city of Vero Beach and the town of Indian River Shores have now agreed to share in both the purchase price and the maintenance costs of the long-disputed Lost Tree Islands. This morning, commissioners consider the county commitments recommended by staff to preserve these islands from residential development. If the commission approves, the agreement to purchase will be presented to Lost Tree Village Corp., which will have until next Wednesday to accept or reject it.

Because the purchase price is more than the "as-is" approved appraised value, the county's acceptance of the purchase agreement requires approval of four of the five commissioners. It's a reasonable deal.

► The county's share of the purchase price, \$8,077,000, will come from county funds dedicated to land conservation.

► Because its financial contribution is the largest, the county will hold an 80 percent title to the islands.

► The county will contribute a third of the cost of restoration and management of the islands, a condition attached to the state's contribution of \$4,875,000. The other two-thirds of the cost will be split equally between Vero Beach and Indian River Shores.

The commissioners' approval should come with the same unanimity that Vero Beach and Indian River Shores council members showed yesterday. For the city and the town, the deal is more than reasonable.

The cost of the agreement to each of them is a pittance compared with the awards possible in lawsuits brought against them by the corporation. Lost Tree Village claims that ordinances passed by Vero Beach and Indian River Shores — ordinances that in effect and intent prohibited the islands' development — are a "taking" of its land for which it is due compensation. By kicking in less than \$1,077,000 apiece, both localities can get what they say they've wanted all along — no development of the Lost Tree islands — plus dismissal of the corporation's suits against them.

They get something, too, they didn't ask for but should heed: a warning that this kind of limiting legislation is touchy, and the time to pass it is before the situation it addresses comes up, not afterward.

For Lost Tree Village Corp., the purchase agreement offers payment of \$15,105,000 for the islands, a charitable deduction for the "bargain" sales price, and an end to the prospect of eminent domain, which the purchase agreement promises if the corporation rejects it.

Not only has the time come to put this prolonged and increasingly complicated dispute behind everybody involved, an agreement that will do so is in hand. All it needs is every signature required on every dotted line.