

# Board votes to buy islands

Since 1989, Lost Tree has tried to develop the islands.

By Henry A. Stephens  
staff writer

The Indian River County Commission made history Tuesday, taking a formal vote on its long-discussed \$15 million to the Lost Tree Village Corp. for six islands and other property in the Indian River.

In a 4-1 vote, the commission authorized The Conservation Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental charity, to make the offer. Commissioner Caroline Ginn won the vote on her motion to "move ahead" with the purchase plan.

"We waited for 13 years to solve this problem," Ginn said. "This is the jewel of our land-acquisition program. It's not something that should be ignored after all these years."

But whether Lost Tree, the developers of John's Island, will accept the offer was still a question Tuesday evening.

Company President Charles Bayer maintained his prior silence on whether the price is right. He continued to insist that he would only look at a formal offer. But that means the offer, he said, not a vote.

"Voting to make an offer isn't them making an offer," Bayer said. "I haven't received anything in writing with deposit checks."

Lost Tree since 1989 has

tried to develop the islands, but environmentalists have argued that developing the islands would cripple the river's ecology with added fertilizers and other pollution.

Charles Lee of Maitland, the second vice president of Florida Audubon Society, warned commissioners Tuesday that such development would occur if the islands weren't purchased.

"This type of real estate, if not bought by the public outright, is inevitably developed within the growth of the urban landscape of Florida," he said.

Funding would come from \$8 million from the county in environmental bond money, plus \$1 million each from Vero Beach and Indian River Shores and up to \$5 million

from the Florida Communities Trust.

The Vero Beach City Council and the Indian River Shores Town Council both endorsed the proposal in August.

Ginn's motion followed Commissioner Ken Macht, the lone dissenter, failing to get a second on a prior motion to deny the proposal.

Macht said spending \$15 million would be "a stab in the back for taxpayers" if courts rule against Lost Tree's various lawsuits, such as a \$100 million claim the two municipalities illegally restricted zoning.

County-hired appraisers have valued the islands from \$6.5 million "as is" to \$16.2 million if the company can build a bridge and develop at residential densities.