

Arboretum backers don't like UCF deal

Contributed by Marjorie Holt
Wednesday, September 14 2011

The Sierra Club questions the future of the remaining Arboretum lands. Read the article below to see why we question the University's commitment to protect campus conservation lands.

orlandosentinel.com/news/local/orange/os-ucf-arboretum-decision-20110913,0,6852680.story

OrlandoSentinel.com

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Kevin Spear, Orlando Sentinel

10:38 PM EDT, September 13, 2011

PALATKA — The St. Johns River Water Management District agreed Tuesday to drop \$23,000 in penalties against the University of Central Florida for environmental damage to its Arboretum in exchange for the school restoring wetlands and forest elsewhere on campus at cost of \$35,000.

That may close at least a chapter in a long-running controversy over 8 acres of Arboretum that students and environmentalists revere as the largest green space in the core of the school's campus.

Arboretum defenders continue to oppose any move by UCF to develop the property and are soliciting legal help in Central Florida for an attempt to undo key decisions by the water district to lift special protections from the property.

"This particular parcel of land is historically important to the campus, and the campus has repeatedly ignored public input on their plans for this land," said Emily Ruff, a UCF graduate and Arboretum defender who was unable to drive the nearly 100 miles from Orlando to the district's meeting in Palatka.

However, the university sent five representatives, including its chief financial officer, facilities officials and a biologist.

UCF development attorney Brenna Durden told district board members that agency staff members were "helpful and diligent in pursuing the district's mission but at the same time willing to work with the university so that the university can continue to aspire to its mission of providing higher education."

School officials have said they will develop plans for the Arboretum property within the coming year.

"It is apparent that this institution of higher learning lacks the commitment to fulfill the regulatory requirements that are necessary to maintain the environmental integrity of the university's conservation lands," Marjorie Holt of the Sierra Club Central Florida Group said in a letter sent Tuesday to the district.

The property was heavily forested when Hurricane Charley swept the state in 2004. A cleanup afterward, as well as unpermitted dredging and filling of wetlands and construction of a bridge and walkways, left the Arboretum property largely denuded.

That damage ultimately caused the district to levy its \$23,000 fine.

Though Arboretum defenders pressed for restoration of the eight acres, UCF also succeeded earlier this year in transferring key legal protections from that tract to another parcel of wetlands and forest.

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