

Audubon chapter tried to flip donated land for cash, donor may sue

By Stephen Hudak, Orlando Sentinel 2 days ago

Living and working in Maryland, he said he couldn't travel often to Florida to enjoy a walk in his woods but decided others should get the chance. He gave the 6-acre property with its untouched oak and pine canopies to the Oklawaha Valley Audubon Society in December 2007 to keep as a wildlife sanctuary forever.

But the small Audubon chapter, one of 43 independent branches in Florida, listed the land for \$189,000 last year with a broker who specializes in commercial real estate.

"I was flabbergasted and felt betrayed," Robinson said. "You trust them without thinking twice."

He asked a lawyer to challenge the chapter's effort to flip his land for money.

The disagreement between Robinson and the Eustis-based Audubon chapter has dragged on for months. Both sides have lawyers.

The parties talked about turning the land over to a third party, the Catholic Diocese of Orlando. St. Patrick Catholic Church and its campus is located across the road from the wildlife preserve on land the diocese bought from Robinson in 2017 for \$1.8 million.

Tavares attorney Timothy Hoban, who represents Robinson, said his client has considered suing for fraud.

The Audubon chapter's counsel, Zachary Broome, declined to discuss details, concerned his comments could interfere with a potential resolution.

"The position of the Audubon Society is they are working to address Mr. Robinson's concerns and to amicably resolve the matter," the lawyer said.

In 2008, the chapter announced Robinson's gift in "The Limpkin Call," its quarterly newsletter, which is named for a gangly bird's shrill squawk.

"In an area of intense commercial development, even six acres is a welcome area of conservation of natural Florida," the news tidbit read.

The article noted the chapter promised to put up a sign identifying the property as the Pollack-Robinson Wildlife Preserve, a donation by Robinson.

Pollack was Robinson's mother's maiden name. Her family previously owned both the church land and

the disputed preserve, both of which sit in Orange County.

Rubinson said he paid \$2,000 for the sign and was irritated it was taken down without notifying him.

Before he donated the land to the nonprofit group, Rubinson recorded a conservation easement to “assure that the property will be retained forever in its existing natural condition and to prevent any use of the property that will impair or interfere with the environmental value of the property,” according to the official document.

It forbid removing trees, constructing buildings on the land or otherwise developing it.

Rubinson even had to record a corrected easement to allow the Audubon chapter to put up the sign identifying the land as a wildlife preserve.

Residents in neighboring Chesterhill Estates noticed last year when the wildlife preserve sign came down and a for-sale sign went up.

“It just broke my heart,” said Andy Sendry, 72, a retired firefighter who lives nearby with his wife, Denise. “It’s like a wildlife Mecca, a fabulous greenway.”

They like the peaceful woods because it seems to offer a haven for everything from butterflies to bears. But the triangular property also fronts 1,100

feet on Old Highway 441 near the boundary separating Orange and Lake counties.

Stoneybrook Hills Village, a commercial district, lies about a mile east and features a Publix, Beef O'Brady's, McDonald's and Wok N' Roll.

The broker's sales listing for the land boasted the parcel provides "ample room for commercial development" or it could be turned into five homes. It didn't mention it was a wildlife preserve.

Hoban sent a letter to the Audubon chapter's president last year demanding the organization take the property off the market, and it did.

The lawyer also demanded the chapter put up the wildlife preserve sign again. That also happened. But Robinson doesn't want the Oklawaha Valley group to keep the land anymore.

"What happens when I'm gone," he said.

Charles Lee, Audubon Florida's director of advocacy, referred Robinson to the local chapter in 2007 and said he doesn't know how the mess happened.

But he said the state chapter has an "iron-clad" policy about land donations.

"If someone gives a piece of property for conservation," Lee said, "it's going to stay as conservation."

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LOCAL & STATE

Donor blasts nonprofit's land deal

Former land owner
mulls action against
Audubon Society

BY STEPHEN HUDAK

The wooded acres near Mount Dora had been in Kenneth Robinson's family since the 75-year-old chemistry researcher was a boy.

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The Pollack-Robinson Wildlife Preserve borders Old Highway 441 across from St. Patrick Catholic Church near Mount Dora.