

Reproduced from: TCPalm

URL:

http://www.tcpalm.com/tcp/local_news/article/0,2545,TCP_16736_3612891,00.html

Program will keep builders away from Adams Ranch

The deal prevents development on the property in exchange for denser communities on other land

By Charlie Reed
staff writer
March 11, 2005

Bud Adams can't imagine living anywhere else besides the sprawling ranch he's called home for almost 60 years.

The 79-year-old rancher and Fort Pierce native wakes up at dawn to organize the 25 cowboys who work his land. He and his wife Dorothy still live in the "The Hammock" — a cypress-wood house on the ranch they built in 1949.

Facing steep inheritance taxes, citrus canker and an unstable beef market, Adams — like large landowners throughout Florida — has been tempted by developers willing to pay millions to build new homes on the land he owns.

"We could sell the land and make a lot of money, but it should stay the way it is," he said. "I love cattle and horses and cowboys."

But thanks to a new state development program for rural land, Adams could get the best of both worlds.

Ranch preservation

Environmentalists and developers are working together in St. Lucie County on a plan that would preserve the historic Adams Ranch.

They say privately funded efforts to conserve agricultural land in fast-growing counties could be the key to smarter development along the Treasure Coast and throughout the state.

Backed by the Audubon of Florida, the deal would prevent development on the ranch land in exchange for the county approving more homes in a subdivision proposed for northern St. Lucie.

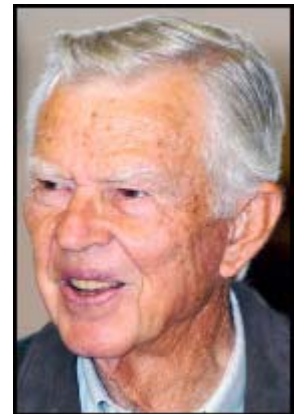
The Florida Legislature established the Rural Land Stewardship Program in 2001 to promote agriculture and ease urban sprawl. It combines planning strategies for low-density, rural areas with agricultural land conservation on tracts larger than 10,000 acres.

"We see it as a way to preserve more land and to preserve it in a



JUAN DALE BROWN
staff photographer

Adams Ranch cowboy Shawn Moss herds cattle on ranch property in northern St. Lucie County. The historic site could be preserved from development if county commissioners approve a proposal to allow more homes on a subdivision planned in another part of the county in exchange for development rights at Adams Ranch.



Adams



different way than we could before," said Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon of Florida.

A straight trade

In essence, the program is simple:

In exchange for a still-to-be-determined amount of money from Palm Beach County developer Enrique Tomeu, Adams would give up any rights to develop the land. Tomeu, in turn, would be eligible for county approval to add more homes than would currently be allowed on the 7,000 acres he already owns.

The deal, which would bind any future owner of Adams Ranch, would protect the land from future development in perpetuity, while confining new homes to more compact areas known as "clusters."

County zoning laws covering rural St. Lucie allow no more than one home per 5 acres. That means about 3,600 homes could be built on the 18,000-acre Adams Ranch.

If the Land Stewardship deal goes through, the number of homes Adams Ranch potentially could hold would be added to Tomeu's development, which is also limited to one home per 5 acres.

The final density of the new community would depend on a number of factors, primarily environmental conditions on the Adams Ranch land.

Ultimately, the deal would require approval from the St. Lucie County Commission and authorization from the state Department of Community Affairs.

Commissioner Doug Coward said he supports the plan, which could come before the commission as early as May.

If approved, the proposal could lay the framework for future development in the county, he said.

"It fits right in with what the county wants to do," Coward said. "As it is now, our Comp Plan is basically a recipe for sprawl."

'Devil's in the details'

The idea of "clustering" has fueled the growth debate along the Treasure Coast for years.

Maggy Hurchalla, a former Martin County commissioner, is leading the charge against clustering proposals in rural Martin County, where only one home is allowed on 20-acre lots.

"I think that game is a fraud and we wouldn't end up with more environment, we'd end up with more development," she said.

Despite those reservations, Hurchalla said clustering is more feasible in St. Lucie County because its 200,000 acres of undeveloped agricultural land already allow one house per 5 acres — equating to 40,000 new homes.

If the Adams Ranch proposal is a "sound" conservation plan that would only expand the urban services boundary in "the right place, I would adopt it," she said.

"But the devil's in the details."

'A lot worth preserving'

Either way, Adams can't complain. He stands to benefit the most. He'll profit from development without selling his land outright, but still get to run the cattle business his family has owned and operated since 1937.

The Adams Ranch includes expansive prairies, lush cabbage palm and oak tree hammocks, upland scrub habitat and wetlands dotted with 500-year-old cypress trees and native orchids.

Although the ranch was drained in the 1930s and holds a billion gallons of water in reserve, it's still in pristine condition, he insists.

"I think they'll find a lot worth preserving here," he said.

"It looks just like it did in its natural state," he said. "Cattle have grazed this land for more than 400 years since they were first brought here by the Spanish."

- charlie.reed@scripps.com



Copyright 2005, Scripps Treasure Coast Publishing Co.
[Click for permission to reprint](#)

Copyright 2005, TCPalm. All Rights Reserved.