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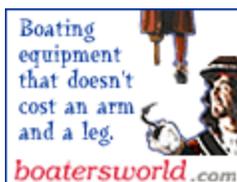
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State exchanges land with Oakland County developer

DNR approves deal for South Fox Island

December 8, 2001

BY DAWSON BELL

FREE PRESS LANSING STAFF

LANSING -- Calling it the best deal available, Department of Natural Resources Director K.L. Cool approved a land swap Friday on South Fox Island in Lake Michigan designed to consolidate both public and private holdings.

Under the agreement, the state will exchange about 220 acres it owns on the west side of the island for a similarly-sized parcel on the north end owned by David Johnson, the Oakland County developer best known for the Bay Harbor resort project near Petoskey.

Cool's decision came a day after a three-hour hearing on the proposal before the Natural Resources Commission.

Johnson proposed the exchange last month, after a more sweeping plan to swap South Fox lands was withdrawn in the face of widespread opposition from environmentalists, American Indian tribes and members of Congress.

Johnson, the only private landholder on the island, has been negotiating with the state for a decade to reduce what he calls an irrational patchwork of ownership.

He claimed the mix made the public lands less accessible and the private land subject to trespass. DNR officials agreed.

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Cool called Friday's decision "a simple plan . . . the best possible one for all parties."

"Everyone agrees that South Fox Island is one of Michigan's ecological gems worth saving," he said in a statement. "Unfortunately, it appears that opponents of the proposal have mistaken South Fox Island for Fantasy Island."

Groups opposing the plan argued that the land to be given up by the state was ecologically more valuable than the land it is to receive. Both parcels were appraised at about \$790,000.

The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians also opposed the proposal, citing unresolved land claims to some of the property the state was acquiring.

Cool said the state was adequately protected and that the issue did not affect his decision.

Johnson, who testified before the NRC Thursday, said he has no plans to develop his property, and he has created trusts to protect it for as long as 100 years.

Jim Lively of the Michigan Land Use Institute said opponents of the exchange are skeptical about Johnson's pledge to preserve the property. A better long-range plan for the state would be acquisition of the island's private land, he said.

The acreage that will go to Johnson includes sand dunes that are "truly, truly special," Lively said, and far more valuable than the property the state will get.

Contact *DAWSON BELL* at 313-222-6609 or bell@freepress.com

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