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Swampy land deal to wildlife refuge: School district to turn over land in Southwest Ranches



Carey Wagner Sun Sentinel

A Peregrine Falcon housed at the South Florida Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale. The wildlife center plans to move to vacant land now owned by the Broward School District (Sun Sentinel / File)



By **SCOTT TRAVIS** | South Florida Sun Sentinel

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A tract of swampy land once planned for a school in Southwest Ranches will now get a new life as a wildlife refuge and animal hospital.

It's part of the school district's ["reimagining schools"](#) effort to find new uses for property it no longer needs due to declining student enrollment. This particular tract, off Sheridan Street between Southwest 185th Way and SW 190th Avenue, also was troubled due to its location on swampland, which was determined to be unsuitable for a high school.

The School Board agreed Tuesday to enter into a three-party agreement with the town of Southwest Ranches and the South Florida Wildlife Center on Thursday. It's a 50-year lease agreement for 8.25 acres of a 30.1-acre lot. The district will be able to sell the remaining acres, officials said.

The South Florida Wildlife Center, founded in 1969, cares for native wildlife animals in the tricounty area. It's the highest volume wildlife care facility in Florida, treating between 10,000 to 12,000 animals per year from nearly 300 different species, according to the center's website. Its current home is on Southwest Fourth Avenue in the Fort Lauderdale area, on county-owned land near the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

The center has outgrown its current home, and the airport wants the current wildlife center space for its own expansion, Alessandra Medri, executive director of the wildlife center, told the South Florida Sun Sentinel on Tuesday.

She said it's a good partnership with the school district, because the new center, slated to open in a couple of years, has a major educational component to it.

"We've committed to build not only a wildlife teaching hospital but also an educational center that will allow the students of Broward County to come to that location and be educated about wildlife," Medri said.

The school district is eager to dispose of the land, which it bought from Southwest Ranches in 2004 for \$4.3 million, higher than four appraisers said the district should have paid. The land was completely covered in muck and sawgrass, the [Sun Sentinel reported](#) at the time.

“Currently, the real property is now mostly wetlands, and the [Broward School District] has determined that a public school is no longer viable at this location, and it desires to be made whole on its purchase,” a district document said.

The property is currently zoned only for the development of a school. But Southwest Ranches agreed to lift its deed restriction on the acres that will not be used by the wildlife center “to enable the future development of single-family homes, consistent with the town’s Rural Ranches zoning district, thereby giving, the SBBC the ability to recuperate its investment in the real property.”

The deal is a win for everyone involved, Southwest Ranches Mayor Steve Breitkreuz told the School Board on Tuesday.

“Finally, we’re able to use this property for an educational purpose and not only will it not cost you money, but it will generate funds for you, so you can devote them to other areas,” he told the board. “South Florida Wildlife Center requires a new home, and we are super excited to potentially have them come to the town of Southwest Ranches.”

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