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Parks may gain virgin forest

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Preservationists are in discussions to acquire a 322-acre tract that would expand the boundaries of the Warner Parks and create a forest experience that could mirror parts of the Smoky Mountains.

Friends of Warner Parks, a group dedicated to preserving and protecting Percy and Edwin Warner Parks, hopes to buy the parcel from H.G. Hill Realty Co. and give it to the city parks department.

The parcel is between Highway 100 and U.S. 70S near Bellevue. Of the tract's 322 acres, more than 200 consist of old growth forest, said Lawson Allen, president of Friends of Warner Parks. Research shows there are only two other old-growth forests in urban areas in the country, and those are in the Pacific Northwest, Lawson said. An old-growth forest typically refers to a natural forest undisturbed by logging, windstorms, fire or significant human activity.

"There's nothing in the country of this size where you could actually have schoolchildren go out and walk trails in a growth forest that's never been cut and feel the full effect of what you might experience in the heart of Smoky Mountains, but be able to do it right here in a major city," Lawson said.

James Granbery, chief executive of H.G. Hill Realty, declined to comment about any negotiations with Friends of Warner Parks.

Land bought in 1800s

Lawson said the forest must have escaped being logged because H.G. Hill acquired the property in the 1800s — before major loggers came through the area.

Friends of Warner Parks has previously purchased 150 acres along the north side of Highway 100. If the group is able to buy the H.G. Hill land, it would combine both tracts and give them to the city at one time, organization officials said.

Roy Wilson, director of Metro Parks and Recreation Department, said the city would "land-bank" the park as part of the Warner Parks system and eventually develop a walking trail. He said a cave was also on the property.

No city money would be involved in the purchase, he said. However the group is applying for state and federal grants and soliciting donations.

Lawson said his organization has been talking with corporate leaders to raise funds. "We've had good support from the city as well as the state. We've tried to raise funds toward this effort even if we don't have a contract."

Edwin and Percy Warner Parks consist of more than 2,600 acres.

"This piece of property is probably the last large piece of property that's available for sale," said Eleanor Willis, executive director of Friends of Warner Parks.

"The primary goal is to protect the existing park because of any number of developments moving forward along Highway 100," Lawson said. "We wanted to protect the boundaries, and this new piece of property could be a gem to this community."