

Three Bend represents classic struggle



Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency Wildlife Manager Jim Evans stands on a roadway at Freels Bend on the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Reservation. 'This type of habitat is fast disappearing,' Evans told The Oak Ridger.

By: John Huotari | The Oak Ridger

Most everyone would probably agree that the Three Bend area in south Oak Ridge contains some of the most beautiful property in the city, complete with rolling meadows, tree-lined ridges and panoramic waterfront views.

Much of the rolling 3,000-acre expanse is tucked in between the hills and mountains of Appalachia, and the slow-moving waters of Melton Hill Lake. It is south of Bethel Valley Road and east of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Naturalists say Three Bend is a prime bird-watching area, and scientists call it an "amazing" research environment. Meanwhile, state officials regularly work there to restore native grass ecosystems, and preserve and diversify the area's animal habitat.

What has some of them concerned is the possibility that part of the Three Bend area might be transferred to Oak Ridge for high-end residential and commercial development.

"That doesn't fit into our vision," said Virginia Dale, a board member of Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation. "We see that private development of this public land is inappropriate because it's a public resource."

AFORR members, who support preserving natural resources, have drafted a Three Bend vision statement that emphasizes using the area for science education, environmental research, public recreational opportunities, and habitat and wildlife protection.

City officials, on the other hand, have another vision. Hungry for tax revenues, they want one of the three bends — Solway Bend — transferred from the U.S. Department of Energy to Oak Ridge, possibly for commercial or residential use.

"We would like that transferred to the city for development," Oak Ridge City Manager Jim O'Connor said. "We have so few waterfront lots."

Storied history

Known formally as Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Refuge Area, this valuable DOE property in Anderson County includes Solway Bend, Freels Bend and Gallaher Bend. East of ORNL, the property extends to the Dr. Herman Postma Memorial Solway Bridge on state Highway 62.

Three Bend has a storied history. It includes the historic Freels Bend Cabin, and several decades ago the area was used as part of a project to study radiation effects on large farm animals, said Frank Harris, University of Tennessee associate vice chancellor for research.

In 1999, former U.S. Department of Energy Secretary Bill Richardson visited Oak Ridge and announced that Three Bend was one of several tracts being set aside nationwide as conservation and wildlife management areas. That move reportedly caught local officials by surprise.

"The city had no knowledge that those discussions were under way," said Amy Fitzgerald, Oak Ridge government and public affairs coordinator. "There really was no prior consultation with the city."

Since then, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has managed the land and its resources under two five-year agreements. The most recent agreement was signed on Feb. 1, 2006, said Walter Perry, deputy director of public affairs for DOE's Oak Ridge office.

He said DOE officials have not drawn up plans for what might happen to Three Bend after 2010.

The Three Bend parcels are part of a discontinued national program intended to help DOE communities like Oak Ridge become financially self-sufficient. In the case of Three Bend, that means city officials want first crack at the land if DOE decides the property is excess.

“The properties were to be transferred to help build a tax base,” Fitzgerald said.

Previously-conveyed parcels include the area now known as Commerce Park, an industrial and office park on South Illinois Avenue, and Rarity Ridge, a residential development under construction off state Highway 58.

Perry said there are no current plans to declare Three Bend as excess land.

In the meantime, city and AFORR officials said developers have expressed interest in some of the land, especially the 460-acre portion closest to Knox County.

“For years, developers have been asking me about developing lakefront property at Solway Bend,” Oak Ridge Mayor David Bradshaw said.

However, no formal proposals have been developed, he said.

‘Amazing’ environment

On a recent Three Bend tour, TWRA Wildlife Manager Jim Evans said the area is one of the most biologically diverse in the ridge-and-valley system that is associated with the Tennessee River. Most of the rest of the system is developed, Evans said.

“This type of habitat is fast disappearing,” he said, referring to Three Bend. “Everything (else) is manicured, herbicided and mowed.”

On the tour, Evans pointed out a turkey and deer on the edge of an open field, surrounded by various types of wildflowers and trees, including sugar maple, ash and flowering magnolia. An osprey nest could be seen on top of a nearby utility pole.

In addition to the turkeys, deer and other animals, DOE’s Oak Ridge reservation contains more than 200 different bird species, said Pat Parr, ORNL natural

resources manager. The reservation also has 21 plants that are on Tennessee's threatened or endangered lists.

At Three Bend, Evans said, TWRA is trying to restore some native ecosystems by, for example, planting native "warm-season" grasses on a 100-acre plot on Freels Bend. The agency is also using land-management techniques to establish diverse habitats and working to eliminate invasive, exotic plants like kudzu and fescue.

Evans said Three Bend has a lot of research potential, especially considering its proximity to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and what is commonly referred to as the UT Arboretum on South Illinois Avenue.

University of Tennessee researchers and others are already conducting research in the Three Bend area. Evans drove The Oak Ridger past former UT research areas on Solway Bend and past a current one on Freels Bend.

Most of the current UT researchers come from the university's department of ecology and evolutionary biology, Harris said.

One of those researchers, Nate Sanders, called Three Bend an "amazing patchwork of old fields, forests and aquatic ecosystems." By his count, the area has attracted about 50 researchers in the last few years, including professors, visiting scientists, middle and high school science teachers, and postdoctoral, graduate and undergraduate students.

Sanders, a UT assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, said some of their work has been published in prestigious journals like Science.

The Three Bend area includes land that is part of DOE's National Environmental Research Park — a 20,000-acre "giant outdoor laboratory." That park attracts many researchers each year. For example, Parr said, 270 researchers from 50 different organizations used the research park in 2005, including educational groups, state and federal agencies, and others.

Though it is not clear what the future of Three Bend will be, Gary Jacobs, ORNL environmental sciences division director, said officials are studying how different parts of the Oak Ridge reservation might fulfill future research needs.

A unique feature of Solway Bend, he said, is its forest-field interfaces, called fingers.

“The Three Bend sticks out as being very desirable for certain types of experiments,” Jacobs said. “But, there are other parts of the reservation that are desirable for other types of experiments.”

Green communities

Oak Ridge officials said they are especially interested in environmentally-sensitive residential development — so-called green communities — if Solway Bend is transferred to the city. The development could possibly take advantage of local energy-efficiency research, Mayor Bradshaw said.

For a variety of reasons, including UT research, city officials said they would support putting into permanent conservation easements the other two bends — Freels Bend and Gallaher Bend. They point out the city already has a large conservation easement, the Black Oak Ridge Conservation Easement on the west end of town, near the former K-25 Site.

City Manager O’Connor said a Solway Bend residential development could provide additional housing for new workers at ORNL, which he said is Oak Ridge’s fastest-growing employer. Those employees could walk to work if a greenway system were put in, O’Connor said.

Also, needed infrastructure is already in place, he said.

But some of those opposed to residential developments on Solway Bend say UT officials might be considering establishing a research station there.

Harris, UT’s associate vice chancellor for research, said university officials have looked at various possible sites across the region, but nothing has worked out so far.

He said UT officials recognize the importance of the Oak Ridge reservation, especially Three Bend, but do not have any definitive plans to put in a research station there.

Then, taking off his metaphorical UT hat and putting on his Nature Conservancy of Tennessee hat, this former member of the conservancy’s board of trustees said Three Bend has the same qualities as the Great Smoky Mountains, in terms of bird migration and native wildflowers — “all the things that go into why we appreciate the Smokies.”

Harris questioned whether other land would be suitable to replace Solway Bend for certain types of research.

"I think we need to make those kinds of decisions in a very studied way," he said.

Looking for a 'reasonable discussion'

AFORR and city officials said they are interested in working together to try to reach consensus on what could be done with Three Bend if it were transferred in the future.

"We are wide open to a reasonable discussion," Bradshaw said. However, the discussion must include more than AFORR and city officials, and it must draw in experts on such things as "green communities," he said.

Although no meetings have been scheduled yet, the mayor said the discussion has to include a willingness to consider residential development on Solway Bend.

"I really think there are some opportunities, but it's going to take some give on all sides," he said.

AFORR's Dale said her group would like to work with the city to develop a Three Bend cost-benefit analysis that could determine what activities would provide the best value to the public using economic and other considerations.

"I believe the city is interested in economic strength," Dale said. "We are interested in that as well."

In their draft vision, two possible uses recommended by AFORR include a wildlife management and rehabilitation center, as well as a regional science camp similar to the Space Camp in Huntsville, Ala. Dale said Three Bend could be part of a recreational corridor that would extend north on Melton Hill Lake to Haw Ridge and the Oak Ridge Marina.

"We have this gem, and we want to make it more than that," she said.

In the meantime, the only bend that is usually open to the public is Gallaher Bend, the one that is farthest west. There, at Clark Center Park, the public can enjoy a variety of recreational opportunities, including ball fields, a greenway trail, and picnic and swimming areas.

However, the public is also allowed into other Three Bend areas at other times, including for spring bird walks and educational opportunities at Freels Bend Cabin.

Evans said officials hope to eventually open parts of all three bends to the public, once safety concerns such as old, abandoned buildings are addressed.

"I think this is something the whole Oak Ridge community could use," he said at the end of the recent tour, before climbing into his green TWRA pickup truck, turning it around and driving back into the section of land that many consider a "crown jewel."

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