

DOE can both preserve, develop excess land for city's benefit

Our opinion pages have been abuzz in recent weeks regarding the Three Bends area of Oak Ridge, with columns and letters to the editor regarding the issue.

The Three Bends area is a 3,000-acre tract of land with 20 miles of shoreline on the south part of Oak Ridge, running from the former Solway Bridge to the west, or left as you enter the city across the bridge.

At the end of August, Ellen Smith wrote a column for the group Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation arguing for either extension, or permanence, of an agreement to maintain the 3,000 acres of Three Bends as a conservation and wildlife management area.

Smith's column was immediately followed by a column response from former state Rep. David Coffey.

Both agreed the decision by former DOE Secretary Bill Richardson to create the conservation area was a surprise. This fact alone should merit a careful study of the issue before the current 5-year agreement is extended or made permanent early next year.

While Smith worries about the conservation of the area, Coffey sees the economic potential.

This issue doesn't fit the typical political mode these days of fiery Democratic or Republican resolve. Rather, it favors the more practical, and formerly more common, approach of compromise.

Two things are clear in our mind.

First, Oak Ridge is a very green city, despite its horrid reputation. We have the UT Arboretum, which is more

than 2,200 acres. We have Haw Ridge Park, more than 750 acres. And just within the last couple of years, we've had an additional 3,000 acres set aside for permanent conservation on the west end of Oak Ridge.

Additionally, Oak Ridge has, according to the city's Web site, "over 30 miles of public greenways and walking trails - nearly double the average length in comparable cities in Tennessee. Also, Oak Ridge has 46 acres of parkland per 1,000 population, nearly five times the national standard."

Second, it's clear Oak Ridge has barely grown in either population or revenue base in the last 40 years. The city bears both the asset and inherent burden of having DOE facilities located within it. Our property tax rate is high by the standards of our sister cities and our retail sector is weak by any standard.

The 3,000 acres of the Three Bends area is excess land no longer needed by DOE. It should be put to the highest and best use outside the Department.

Obviously, some parts of the area aren't suited for development, such as Freels Cabin, which was built in 1820.

But at the same time, additional land for lake front housing would help reduce the tax pressure on both homeowners and businesses.

Without a doubt, there's a nice compromise, which could be hammered out. This compromise could permanently preserve a portion for conservation while also allowing the city more land for future growth.