

# Wetlands may be out of reach

**LOS CERRITOS:** Conservancy backs acquisition but won't pay more than fair market value.

By Joe Segura Staff Writer

LONG BEACH — The state will not be able to purchase Los Cerritos Wetlands for restoration purposes, under the land-swap deal now being proposed, according to a key state conservancy official.

The wetlands land-swap deal would exchange 37.7 acres of the Bixby Ranch portion of the wetlands in southeast Long Beach for the city's 13.4-acre Public Service Yard by the Los Angeles River.

However, some environmentalists have mounting concerns about whether the city is getting a fair deal. The critics are questioning the values of the two properties and are fearful that the wetlands will be priced out of the state's reach.

Environmentalists are seeking a 30-day delay of today's scheduled City Council vote, until appraisals are conducted.

Mary Small, who manages the state Coastal Conservancy's south coast region, from Ventura to San Diego counties, emphasized

recently that acquisition and restoration is a priority goal for the agency, but warned that the agency will not pay grant funds — once state resources become available again — beyond the fair appraisal price for the wetlands.

"The Conservancy cannot participate in an acquisition for more than fair market value," she stated in a July 22 response to a question by Los Cerritos Wetlands Land Trust board member Tom Marchese.

City Manager Patrick West said there are three appraisals that will be part of the council's review.

"They're rough appraisals," he conceded, acknowledging that there are no delineation studies that pinpoint what land is wetlands and what land might be developed — the latter making the acres more pricey.

When city contract negotiator and Public Works Director Mike Conway presented the proposed land deal to the City Council on Feb. 10, he told them the 33.77 acres of wetlands — the original acreage in the deal — were valued between \$9.19 million and \$36.78 million, depending on how much of the property could legally be developed. One week earlier, he gave a report valuing the property from \$12 million to \$18 million.

However, two independent property

appraisals refute that: A 2003 appraisal for the Trust for Public Land, a national environmental organization, places the value of 191 acres of wetlands at \$14.2 million. The City Auditor's analysis estimates the 33.77-acre parcel — the deal's original acreage — if not developable, could be worth as little as \$1.4 million, based on the 2003 review.

A second appraisal, conducted recently for Marchese, shows the value of 33.77 acres of wetlands at \$6.9 million, and the city yard at \$14.5 million.

The city auditor has concluded the proposed land swap has "serious risks" and could cost the city millions of dollars more than has been officially estimated.

Doud's analysis, which isn't a full audit, notes a risk that has been repeatedly criticized since the land exchange was announced last year — the fact that wetlands owner Tom Dean won't allow a delineation study of his property to determine how much of it is actually wetlands and how much is developable.

"Without a delineation study or an appraisal of land to be acquired, market value is unknown," Doud stated. "Current owner will not allow such study, so city assumes risk."

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