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February 14, 2006

Daytona picks site for police station

By **CINDY F. CRAWFORD**
 Staff Writer

DAYTONA BEACH -- Two years. Two million dollars over budget. Four miles away from the city's center.

The site for the city's new police headquarters has been selected, but it's likely not where voters envisioned it when they approved a \$24 million bond to build it in 2003.

The city is negotiating with one of the area's largest landowners to buy 28 acres at Mason Avenue and Williamson Boulevard -- on the city's west side -- for \$2 million.

When the idea was pitched to voters, it was slated for construction on city-owned land across the street from the current station at Nova Road and Orange Avenue, where the state driver's license bureau has been for 40 years.

The plan to build there dissolved when city officials said it was too wet and not big enough for the station.

But it's not too wet for commercial development. Despite reported drainage problems, city officials are making plans to relocate the license bureau and put the land up for sale to get it back on the tax rolls.

"We want the highest and best use for the property," City Manager Jim Chisholm said.

Several business owners in the area said it doesn't flood that much at the site and would make a good home for a new station or a store.

"They should have enough land to build the headquarters where it is now with what land they have now," said Derrick Harris, longtime owner of a building with a barbershop and a church on Orange Avenue, who couldn't recall a flooding problem in his 17 years there.

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Under the original plan, the city spent \$613,000 to buy a church and several houses behind the license bureau to amass enough land for a station. Staff ended up with 9.5 acres but decided they needed 11 acres and started searching for another location.

By last fall, three parcels made the short list and last month the Mason Avenue and Williamson Boulevard property, owned by Consolidated-Tomoka Land Co., reached the top. The City Commission will be asked to approve using the property Wednesday and should be ready to buy it in March when negotiations are settled.

The new 28-acre site includes about 10 acres of wetlands that can't be used, but there's still plenty of room for the proposed three-story, 97,000-square-foot station, acting Police Chief Paul McKitrick said. The \$24 million bond approved by voters would cover construction of the building but not the land. The city plans to pay for the land, in part, using a police impact fee that would be charged to every new house built.

McKitrick said the Orange Avenue property wasn't compatible because it floods when the nearby Nova Canal fills up. After the 2004 hurricanes, significant flooding made it hard to drive on Orange Avenue at Caroline Street for a week, he said.

When asked if the drainage issues would affect attracting commercial development, McKitrick said it could.

"If it's not stable enough for a police station there, who is it stable for?" McKitrick said.

City officials have said drainage could be fixed at the license bureau site, which becomes available for city use March 1 when the 40-year lease the state signed in 1966 -- and paid \$1 to secure -- ends. The state hasn't asked for an extension, said Support Services Director Paul Wetzel.

Wetzel said he has been helping the state look for a new location, such as a storefront in a shopping center, and city leaders asked lawmakers in a December hearing to set aside funds to pay for the move. The city also may have to pitch in, he said.

City officials hope to find a business interested in building at the busy Nova Road corner -- either in place of the license bureau or the current police station, which the city may also sell. City leaders also have discussed using the old station as a substation to keep police officers in the center of town.

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