Boynton Beach swaps park land for local jobs

By Erika Pesantes, Sun Sentinel

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Boynton Beach

The city is swapping park land for local jobs by allowing the landlord of a proposed call center to build hundreds of parking spots for future employees.

Officials say it's hard to resist hundreds of new jobs in this economic climate, yet some neighbors and environmentalists argue that building 200 parking spots — nearly eight times more than required just for the park — is overwhelming.

The city estimates the park alone would have needed just 30 spaces.

The call center is moving into a 26,000-square-foot building owned by EWE Warehouse Investments XI in the 3300 block of Quantum Boulevard. The 17 acres of park property is about 500 feet away on the opposite side of the street, abutting a privately owned nature preserve in Quantum Park.

The city doesn't have the money to develop the passive eco-park it envisioned there, and would lease 3 acres to EWE for $10 a year for 10 years with an optional 10-year renewal.

Still, creation of the 200 jobs isn't part of the deal for the park land.

"The economic impact would be of those people working there that would spend money locally, going to lunch, running errands," Mayor Jose Rodriguez said. "The economy, as a whole, will prosper."

"We need to strike a balance somehow," said Commissioner Marlene Ross, whose district includes Quantum Park. "This is a potential 200 jobs. It's hard to say, 'No, you can't do that,' " she said.

Still, sacrificing sparse green space for jobs establishes a "poor precedent," said Drew Martin, chairman of the Sierra Club's Loxahatchee Group, which includes Palm Beach County.

"What happens if jobs don't materialize and they've given up 3 acres of the park?" he asked.

The 271-home Parkside community has been eager to have the eco-park built, and the prospect of a lot full of cars is now angering some.
"People in my development will scream, absolutely scream at that number [of parking spaces]," said Charles Kanter, president of the Parkside Homeowners Association, "I'm going to threaten to resign from the [Recreation and Parks] committee because I would lead the fight against it."

Kanter says he's "baffled" at the thought of a company creating a parking lot "in the middle of the woods" for employees.

Even though the lease agreement is in place, environmental assessments still are required, the mayor said. The agreement doesn't give the company "carte blanche to go do it tomorrow."

"Here's the beauty of it: It's parking, it's pavement, it's not a building," Rodriguez said. "It doesn't take much to remove a parking lot, remove asphalt. The reality of it is it is easily resolved."

The parking lot would have an eco-friendly design, city Public Works Director Jeff Livergood said.

The developer would pay the estimated $400,000 construction cost.

Some environmentalists who surveyed the park land Friday said that while it is full of invasive, exotic species, it nonetheless is dotted with some native oaks and slash pines.

"In my personal opinion, a properly landscaped and buffered parking lot would be infinitely preferable to what's there now… Exotics are spreading and have the potential of spreading even further into the preserve," said Lisa Hanley of the Sierra Club, which has not formally taken a position on the land-for-jobs deal.

The preserve is coastal scrubland and home to native species such as gopher tortoises, which are globally imperiled, she said. Hanley said.

"It won't be a park if it's a parking lot. There's no way a reasonable person can expect that," Joanne Davis, of 1,000 Friends of Florida, said. "It still troubles me that a local government would take a piece of public land and essentially give it away."

The public still benefits from the land deal, says Jim Murley, interim executive director of the South Florida Regional Planning Council and Florida Atlantic University researcher at the Florida Center for Environmental Studies.

Market forces alone are not going to resolve high unemployment until the economy rebounds, and partnerships between local governments and businesses are important for job creation until conditions improve, he said.

"Five years ago when our economy was hot, local governments would not be in the business to worry about this because the private sector would be building everything," Murley said, "But now, we're totally in a different place."