

PRESCOTT - A purchase that city officials hope will be the key to continued preservation of land in the Granite Dells got unanimous support from the [Prescott City Council](#) this week.

At their Tuesday voting session, council members approved paying \$2.9 million for a 35-acre piece of property that sits in the middle of the northeast-Prescott Granite Dells area.

"I think this is the keystone property," Mayor [Jack Wilson](#) said, adding that he hopes the purchase would open the door to other acquisitions in the area.

Years ago, the city prioritized the Granite Dells area as the most important in its quest to preserve scenic pieces of open space.

Since then, Prescott has made several buys in the Dells area, including a 28-parcel area along Granite Creek that the city bought from the Trust for Public Lands in 2006, after Sherman Payne donated it to the organization, and the 25-acre Ericksson parcel that the city bought in 2001.

All of the parcels are on the east side of Highway 89 and are relatively close to one another. Prescott Parks and Trails Superintendent Eric Smith said this week's purchase would advance the city's goal of "bringing this whole corridor into public ownership."

Previously known as the 400 Club and the Granite Gardens, the 35-acre parcel sits directly across the highway from the Granite Gate Resort, Smith said. It includes the three-acre tract that was under community scrutiny several years ago, after owner Richard Hazelwood did excavation work on the land without the proper permits.

Smith explained that the excavation work removed a large concrete barrier that had dammed Granite Creek, creating a small man-made lake in the area.

After the excavation work, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a notice of violation to Hazelwood in 2006 and set a deadline for a restoration plan for the property.

In response to a question from Councilman Bob Bell about whether the owner had satisfactorily mitigated the damage, City Attorney Gary Kidd reported that the matter was "one of the sticking points" that city officials had to deal with before recommending the purchase.

After studying the matter, Kidd said, "I'm comfortable we can cover that core concern without undue cost to the public."

Even so, Michael Byrd of the Prescott Creek Preservation Association pointed out that the mitigation work would not restore the land to its previous condition.

"Restoration to the property's previous state is impractical," Byrd said. "The lake was not a natural lake. The property won't be restored, but it will be returned to a very natural state."

Councilman Robert Luzius maintained that the property would be an asset to the city's open space holdings. "It is actually the gem in the Granite Dells area," he said.

Councilwoman Lora Lopas, whom city officials credited with doing much of the legwork necessary to prepare for the purchase, urged the council to move forward now, while the land is still available.

"Right now, with the real estate market kind of at a bottom, this is the time to buy," Lopas said. "Once it's gone, it's gone forever."

Although the purchase generated mostly support, some concerns did arise about ongoing maintenance of the city's open space land.

Former City Councilman Steve Blair - while he commended the council for the purchase - pushed the city to find a revenue source to cover the growing maintenance costs.

Prior to the purchase, the city had about \$5.5 million available in its open space account, according to Prescott Budget and Finance Director Mark Woodfill. The money comes from the city's 1-percent sales tax for streets and open space.