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N.Y. tries to keep Boy Scouts from selling land

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RIVERHEAD, N.Y. — The Nassau County Council of Boy Scouts wants to sell 147 acres of untouched woodland in a protected part of Long Island's pine barrens to a golf-course developer for \$2 million, infuriating environmentalists and prompting a state agency to offer \$1.3 million for the Scouts' development rights.

The land, an unused part of the council's 500-acre Camp Wauwepex in Riverhead, is within a 52,500-acre area designated as the core of Long Island's 100,000-acre pine barrens preserve.

The 1993 state law that created the preserve prohibits future development in the core area, but the Scout Council is seeking an exemption to allow the golf course, saying that the parcel in question, a finger of land near the Calverton National Cemetery, should never have been included in the core.

If the exemption is granted, the Scout Council said, it could complete a contract with the Middle Island-based developer, Rounoke Links, for \$2 million. The money would be used to continue programs for 11,000 Scouts in Nassau.

But opponents of the plan said it would undermine the hard-fought agreement among environmentalists, property owners and developers to protect both the pine barrens and the vast supply of pure groundwater beneath them, which they said could be contaminated by fertilizers and pesticides used on golf courses.

"It's a sad day when the Boy Scouts of America propose clear-cutting the core of the pine barrens for a golf course," said Richard L. Amper Jr., the executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society and a frequent spokesman for other groups on pine barrens issues.

The state's offer came earlier this month at a hearing before the Long Island Pine Barrens Commission, a five-member state board that oversees the preserve. Ray E. Cowan, Gov. George Pataki's representative on the commission, told members of the Scout Council that the commission would pay \$1.3 million for development rights to the council's entire 500-acre parcel.

"You're looking at \$1.3 million in a couple of weeks versus uncertainty," said Cowan, who is also the Long Island regional director of the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation. "All you've got to do is mail us an application."

Andrew G. Cangemi, a lawyer and vice president for the Nassau County Council of Boy Scouts, said the group would consider the offer, under which the Scouts would retain use of the entire property.

In an interview, Cangemi said the property had been worth up to \$6 million before being included in the core.

The Scout Council had plans to sell the 147-acre plot as early as 1989, but was forced to await the outcome of the move to protect the pine barrens.

"No one is going to pay that much now," Cangemi said. "That's the crux of the whole thing. They can't just pass a law and take this value away from you without giving something back."

But according to James P. Rigano, the counsel to the pine barrens commission, the state and Suffolk County make a practice of paying for core parcels as if they were not restricted by being in the core area.

Trip McMillan, the council's executive director, said the council had lost \$200,000 a year for five years, mainly because of declining donations from the United Way and because so many companies had merged that the number of donors was down. He said the Scouts headquarters in Roslyn was on the market for \$2.4 million as part of an effort to rebuild the council's dwindling endowment.

"Obviously, we have some very serious financial needs," McMillan said. "This sale is crucial to us. We have a strong obligation to provide quality Scouting programs to the young people of Nassau County."

The pine barrens commission's five voting members represent the state, Suffolk County and the three towns where the pine barrens preserve is situated — Southampton, Riverhead and Brookhaven. They are expected to vote next month.

At the hearing this month, Amper warned the commissioners that approval of the golf course would ignite a confrontation with environmental groups that cooperated with developers in setting up the preserve.

"The war of the woods will resume," Amper said. He called a golf course "the greatest source of pollution" threatening the ground water that the preserve was established to protect.