

## Lab's fate soon decided

By **DWAYNE ROBINSON**

*Alligator Staff Writer*

UF President Bernie Machen will decide the fate of the 33-acre pristine environment - UF's Natural Area Teaching Lab - in a few days.

Machen said he would do so Thursday, moments after the UF Faculty Senate unanimously backed a resolution affirming their disapproval of UF donating a portion of the NATL for a road extension aimed at reducing traffic at Archer Road and Southwest 34th Street.

"It's coming soon. I promise," Machen said about his decision. "But we were not going to make a decision before we got that input from the faculty."

Machen said he also plans to consider input from students and UF administrators. The Student Senate passed a resolution in December similar to the Faculty Senate's.

Machen already has consulted with Butler Plaza owner and local developer Clark Butler, a proponent of the NATL donation, Machen said.

UF professor emeritus Thomas Walker, an activist who has sought to halt the 3-acre NATL donation, said he was pleased with the Faculty Senate's actions.

"I'm very gratified that they unanimously advised the administration that they thought the road through the natural area is not something the administration should pursue," Walker said. "If he's (Machen) concerned about the academic programs at the University of Florida, he will decide the Natural Area Teaching Lab is a valuable resource and that the road will degrade it very severely."

If Machen decides to support the donation of the NATL for the road extension, there would need to be an amendment to UF's 10-year comprehensive Master Plan.

Before Machen could approve an amendment, it must first go through a series of UF committees, said Linda Dixon, a manager for the UF Facilities Planning and Construction Division.

"The amendment process hasn't even really started," Dixon said, referring to the fact that the committees have not begun reviewing the proposed amendment.

If Machen does not support the NATL donation, the amendment and the amendment process would not be necessary.

Former UF President Charles Young, who left office in January, and his administration were strong proponents of donating a portion of the NATL.

Both Young and Vice President for Finance and Administration Ed Poppell wrote letters to city and county officials supporting plans to extend Southwest 24th Avenue through the NATL to connect it with Archer Road near its intersection with Southwest 34th Street.

The Alachua County Commission abandoned Butler-backed hopes of turning Southwest 24th Avenue into a four-lane road, which could have complemented a planned Butler Plaza North annex, in November.

The Commission's action did not extinguish city and county officials' hopes for a four-lane road or two-lane road extension through the NATL.

The NATL is situated on the southwestern edge of UF's main campus. Traffic congestion often plagues Archer Road, Southwest 13th Street and their intersection during the evening rush hours.

"By not extending that Southwest 24th Avenue, that intersection would remain operating as it is or get worse," said Bill Lechner, a project manager with the county's Public Works Department, in an earlier interview.