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PRIVATE PROPERTY VS. PUBLIC INTEREST

# Powerful Ga. family puts road to Rome in doubt

Efforts to pave near vacation spot blocked.

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CARTERSVILLE — No roads really lead to Georgia's Rome, at least no direct ones from I-75.

And years of attempts to change that have stalled amid a modern-day gladiator match between a powerful Georgia family and a powerful Georgia bureaucracy.

O. Wayne Rollins, the late co-founder of Atlanta's Rollins Inc., amassed more than 1,800 acres in northwest Georgia for

a family vacation home in the 1970s and 1980s. His powerful family spent the next few decades trying to block the state's effort to build a road linking to Rome that would cut just south of their prized fishing lake.

If just about anyone else owned the land, it would probably already have a busy

street running through it. But the Rollins clan, which controls a multibillion-dollar company specializing in pest control, has waged one of the most aggressive campaigns in state history to block a road project.

Rome road continued on A6

## Protections already put in place

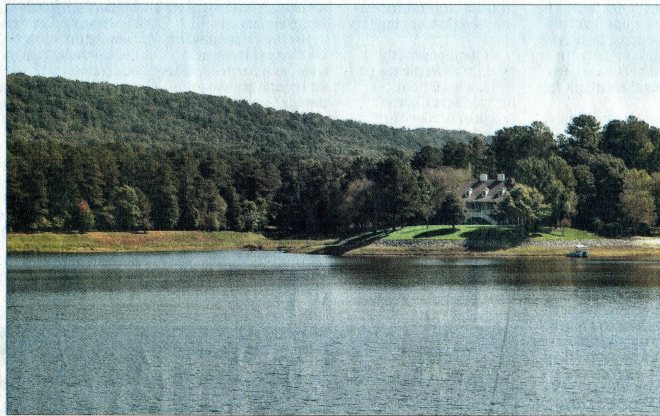
Rome road  
continued from A1

It's left metro Rome's roughly 100,000 residents and business leaders waiting for the dust to settle.

"They have pulled out all the stops. We've never seen anybody fight us this hard," said Albert Shelby, the state transportation official who manages the project. "I'm actually impressed. They've fought the good fight. But from our standpoint, we've got to follow the protocol."

The clan has assembled a team of lawyers, strategists and scientists who have pulled off impressive feats. They have lobbied to turn a chunk of the property into a state-recognized wilderness area, persuaded a federal agency to declare a nearby mine as a historic landscape, dispatched engineers to highlight potential engineering problems and sent biologists to illustrate how construction could threaten birds and wildlife.

Now, some are saying that the gridlock may never break. Even David Doss, the former state Transportation Board member who has championed the road for decades, said it's clear the Rollins clan has enough resources to keep the project in limbo indefinitely.



The late O. Wayne Rollins, owner of Orkin Pest Control, amassed this house and more than 1,800 acres in northwest Georgia. His family's fight to stave off construction of a road through his pristine property in the 1990s helped doom that project. Now the family is waging a battle to block the state's effort to build a road from I-75 to Rome that would cut through the property. JOHNINY CRAWFORD / JCRAWFORD@AJC.COM



Thone Winter, of RFA Management Co., and W. Henry Parkman, of

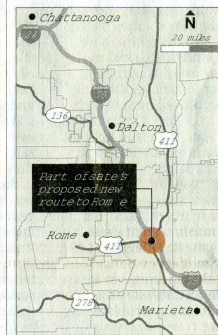
like it was ripped from a postcard. Cattle and horses roam freely on the property, with a rolling mountain landscape looming in the background and a stately home unfolding along the lake.

"My family and I had — and still have — a vision for this property," said Gary Rollins, chief executive of Rollins Inc., whose holdings include Orkin Pest Control. "We assembled the land and over the years have worked to enhance its natural beauty."

The family took a range of steps to protect their land. One of the first moves they made

### PROPERTY DISPUTE

Georgia DOT and the Rollins family have locked horns for decades over plans to create a direct route to Rome via I-75 that would cut through the family's 1,800 acres.



STAFF

Rome business leaders say the route to the north wouldn't eliminate nearly as much traffic and will require drivers to head toward Chattanooga before tilting south to Atlanta.

And in a third stroke, the family donated 107 acres of their property as a conservation easement to the city of Eu-harlee, which designated it as a wildlife refuge. The family then paid Joshua Spence, a North Georgia naturalist, to make 24 visits to the property over a year to document bird species.

He found about 90 different types of birds, including the rare cerulean warbler. Other scientists found federally

project in limbo indefinitely.

"Everybody here in Rome thinks the Rollinses are the villains. Maybe they are," Doss said. "But I do know this, without question. What we've been trying to do for the last 30 years hasn't worked: fighting them. So I'm ready to stop fighting."

For the Rollins family, it's long been personal. Gary Rollins, Wayne's son, said the project would ruin his property, destroy surrounding wilderness and leach harmful toxins into the fishing lake. He says an alternate route a few miles to the north is a better option.

"I don't feel that the government is doing what's right," he said, adding: "Why do all of this harm when there is a clear and better alternative?"

Drivers heading to Rome from the interstate have long had to take a 6-mile stretch of Ga. 20 stuffed with traffic lights and businesses until reaching a divided highway leading to the city.

The lack of a direct route to the highway makes the 70-mile commute to Atlanta between 10 minutes and 30 minutes longer depending on the time of day. But business leaders say it's more than a matter of inconvenience. They say it has cost metro Rome, home to sprawling Berry College and a growing health care industry anchored by Floyd Medical Center, an untold number of jobs.

"Every site selection committee that approaches us asks if we have a direct connector to the interstate. It's crucial," said Ken Wright, the Greater Rome Chamber of Commerce's head

Thone Winter, of RFA Management Co., and W. Henry Parkman, of Sutherland Asbill & Brennan, walk through a wooded area that was a mine in the 1860s. In a bid to preserve their family's large swath of property, the Rollins clan has persuaded a federal agency to declare the mine as a historic landscape. JOHNNY CRAWFORD / JCRAWFORD@AJC.COM

of industry services. "Basically, it's a competitive advantage for communities on the interstate. We have to produce other incentives. It just makes our job that much harder."

At the urging of city leaders, Georgia officials began exploring new ways to connect to Rome in the 1980s, about the same time the Rollins family was putting together the last of the 1,800 acres of Bartow County land for the ranch. Gary Rollins says the family spent \$1 million to build the lake and other improvements only after his father was assured by the Transportation Department that the new road wouldn't carve through his land.

If transportation planners initially had their way, that wouldn't have been a question. They originally chose a route farther north, but the state abandoned that plan in the late 1980s after Anheuser-Busch said it would buy the property and build a brewery there if the route was changed.

Within a year, the state selected a new route for the road that cut through the Rollins estate. That led to a lengthy court battle that resulted in a federal ruling in 1993 — two years after Wayne Rollins' death — that sided with the family and temporarily blocked the road from moving forward.

After more delays and another

scuttled route, state planners are once more planning to blaze a trail through a part of the Rollins land. The route they prefer, called D-VE-A, would cut a swath near a mine dating to the 1860s, pass through a patch of protected land that the family deeded to a small nearby city and then run just below the estate's 100-acre lake before connecting with U.S. 411.

The state isn't ready to resort to a backup plan anytime soon. "We're not out to get the Rollinses," Shelby said. "This was the most economically feasible route that minimizes the environmental concerns and reduces traffic."

What makes the long battle more perplexing is the history of the land. It's not the Rollins family's ancestral home or their sole vacation spot. But the family does have a deep attachment to the land, which looks

of the first moves they made was enlisting attorneys from Sutherland Asbill & Brennan to press their case and coordinate their efforts. They also signed Republican strategist Tom Perdue to help chart their course.

They developed a scattershot approach to stave off the bulldozers. One step involved hiring two scientists who surveyed the nearby manganese mine, called Dobbins, and then persuaded the National Register of Historic Places to list the site. The agency's decision in August makes it more difficult to use federal dollars to build on the land.

The Rollinses also hired an engineering consultant whose findings the family's supporters often cite in their arguments against the road. The consultant, Walter Kulash, reported that the route through the Rollins land would cost \$100 million more than the northern alternative because it is about 2.5 miles longer, would require about a dozen new bridges and would slice through hillier terrain.

Shelby, the DOT manager, disputes those claims. And

er scientists found federally protected plants in the vicinity, and some visitors claimed to see an array of other wildlife nearby, including rare cougars.

"Privately owned pristine habitat is shrinking. And even public-owned lands are shrinking," Spence said. "Right here, we've got untouched large amounts of property, and we don't see that too often."

All of this is infuriating to some Rome residents who have tired of their three-decade wait for a link to the interstate.

"It's not a fair fight. Here they're standing in the way of what has been studied to death and has been called the preferred route. Then all of a sudden a wildlife refuge pops up in the middle of the road. And then they make a mine area a historic shrine," said Pierre Noth, a Rome News-Tribune columnist who supports the path through the Rollins property.

"They're throwing a barrage of stuff out there. They're clever as all hell," Noth said. "And so far it's worked."

The Rollins family, which has likely spent hundreds of thousands — if not more — on the fight, said it isn't about to let up. Their latest step involves a plan to bring nature lovers to the 200-acre overgrown area where the manganese mine once operated to highlight what could be lost if a ribbon of asphalt runs nearby. Gary Rollins is unapologetic.

"We aren't going to relent in our fight, joined by our neighbors, for what we believe is the right thing."

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**Gary Rollins**  
Chief Executive of Rollins Inc.