

Buncombe County Land Conservation
Land Conservation Advisory Board

Conservation easements are legal agreements between landowners and easement granting agencies that allow a landowner to invest in their property and receive permanent tax-deductions by limiting development on their land. The Land Conservation Advisory Board was appointed in January 2004 to examine the use of easements in land conservation for Buncombe County, North Carolina. Priority lands for conservation were selected using GIS technology. Lands are considered high priority if they are included in one or more of seven classifications: large parcels (100+ acres); ridge tops or highlands; waterways, wetlands, watersheds; adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway; historic and working farmlands; adjacent to protected areas; and ecologically sensitive areas.

While over 50,000 acres have been preserved in Buncombe County in National Forest and Parks only five sites account for nearly 94% of the land conserved in the County. The remaining 6% of conserved land in Buncombe County is comprised of relatively small parcels scattered throughout the County. The average size of these parcels is less than 50 acres. Although conserving any land in a county may be of value, some land parcels are more valuable to place under conservation easements based on their size, location and other attributes. For this reason, the Advisory Board agreed on seven priority land classifications to determine what lands would be the best candidates for conservation easements.

Large-sized land parcels of 100+ acres represent large tracts that would be valuable to set aside as a conservation easement. In addition, large parcels that are adjacent to already protected areas represent some of the most desirable lands for conservation. These types of lands are represented by the eight *Conservation Focus Areas*. Not only are these large parcels adjacent to already protected areas, many of these areas are also characterized by being ecologically sensitive, high elevation areas, near waterways and watersheds, adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway, and include historic and working farms. These *Conservation Focus Areas* represents the "low hanging fruits" of the Buncombe County landscape. The *Conservation Focus Areas* are comprised of a relatively small numbers (319) of individual land parcels that cover large areas (113,000+ acres) in the mountainous regions of Buncombe County. A cost-effective and natural approach would be to focus resources on establishing and maintaining conservation easements on large-sized parcels that are very high priority lands.

Historic and working farms represent both the past and present-day agricultural land use of Buncombe County. These high priority lands have undergone continued loss throughout the country. Some of the farmlands in Buncombe County are located within the *Conservation Focus Areas* and/or in proximity to the Rivers and the Parkway. The Swannanoa River, French Broad River, and Blue Ridge Parkway, along with their surrounding lands, are natural corridors that connect the *Conservation Focus Areas*. Like farmlands, these natural corridors have undergone continued loss of acreage worldwide.

The valuable function of rivers and parkways as natural corridors has become very apparent by the effects of three major floods in Buncombe County during September 2004. Recommendations have been made to prevent future devastation and destruction caused by natural phenomena such as hurricanes (North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 11 December 2001). These recommendations include: (a) complete remapping of North Carolina

floodplains; (b) local governments adoption of a carrot-and-stick policy for zoning and enhanced hazard mitigation (FEMA standards); (c) establishing an emergency management trust fund for hazard mitigation; (d) limiting development within the 100-year floodplain; (e) state funds to assist landowners within the 100-year floodplain. Conservation easements would be an ideal solution to conserve critical and valuable natural lands and benefit both land-owners and the County.

Land set aside for conservation is an important goal for any conservation management plan. At the same time, areas that would allow for human population growth and business development need to be considered. Attempts were made to earmark locations that would be prime locations for business development. The Advisory Board agreed that lands for future development should be outside high priority land areas, including ecologically sensitive areas. Searching for ecologically sensitive areas is a formidable task. Locating these areas requires field work rather than simple mapping using GIS, and should be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Ecologically sensitive areas include wetlands, floodplains, riparian habitats, nesting and breeding grounds for endangered and threatened species, old growth forests, and relic habitats, to name a few.

The priority lands remaining in Buncombe County are precious few. The large-sized parcels concentrated in the highlands areas contribute to the unique and beautiful landscape that characterizes Buncombe County. These scenic natural areas draw tourists to this area year-round. They are a driving force for the local tourism economy and need to be protected. This is just one reason why these beautiful and expansive natural areas need to be protected. The happiness and livelihood of residents are intimately intertwined with Buncombe County's scenic beauty and ecological integrity.

Land conservation is a very important and complex endeavor. Fortunately, technology like GIS and GPS (Global Positioning Systems) have enhanced the ability to create management plans. Land conservation in Buncombe County should be approached using pro-active management that relies on these technologies. Recommended steps for pro-active conservation are establishing features of priority lands, mapping lands using GIS, obtaining owner's information, contacting selected landowners, providing information on conservation options, and gathering field (including GPS) data on conservation easements. The Advisory Board established a list of priority lands, mapped these lands, and obtained landowner information. The next steps include contacting individual landowners, providing educational information, and collecting field and GPS data. A strategic plan that follows pro-active conservation and focuses conservation efforts on high priority lands is recommended.

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