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Farmland preservation support is growing

By Dale Neal

Ed Hemphill takes pride in the Reems Creek farm that has supported his family over the last 150 years.

But looking to the future, the 88-year-old farmer has fretted about the housing developments he sees creeping up the valley toward his pastures and timberland.

"I wanted my place to stay a farm," said Hemphill, who has surrendered any rights to develop his 64 acres under a conservation easement with the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.

Buncombe County commissioners earlier this month approved a \$50,000 grant to the conservancy, which has worked with Hemphill to protect the rural views of the property overlooking the Zebulon Vance Birthplace Historic Site for generations to come.

The grant is the latest example of the county's efforts to conserve farmland. Commissioners since 2007 have awarded \$3.3 million to the conservancy to secure about dozen conservation easements on Buncombe's surviving farms.

"I hope they get all the farms they can. We have lost too much land to development," Hemphill said.

Farmland dwindling

A 2007 report from Environment North Carolina predicted North Carolina will lose at least 2 million acres of forests and farmlands by 2027, including 124,700 acres in Western North Carolina, if current development rates continue.

Many residents and visitors share Hemphill's concerns of loss of farmland and are willing to back it up with their pocketbooks, according to a new study from Leah Matthews, a UNC Asheville economist.

Residents surveyed said they would be willing to donate up to \$185 annually to nonprofits to protect farmland, while visitors said they would be willing to donate \$195 a year, according to Matthews' findings in the Farmland Values Study.

Carl Silverstein, executive director of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, was encouraged by the survey findings, underscoring public support for farms that provide local food and tourism dollars.

The conservancy's work in securing easements around Sandy Mush is visible from downtown Asheville, where visitors won't see as many developments spotting the ridges west of the city, Silverstein said.

"And local farm production resonates with people. Here in Buncombe County, you still have producers of meat and milk and produce with access to local tailgate markets and restaurants," he said.

The group has talked with local hotels, exploring options for patrons to contribute a certain amount on their room bills to farmland protection, Silverstein said.

Public funding

Public money plays a role in protecting pastures and fields from creeping subdivisions and shopping centers.

Since 2006, Buncombe County commissioners have spent budgeted about \$6 million and spent about \$3.3 million to protect ridgelines and farms, particularly in Sandy Mush and Fairview properties like the Hickory Nut Gap Farm, according to Debbie Trumpy, a Buncombe County planner.

Easements are going forward on Claxton Farm near Weaverville, a tract owned by Myrtle Duckett and a farm owned by David Everett, both in Sandy Mush, Trumpy said.

"There's always more projects that could be done, if there was more money," Trumpy said. "The Land Conservation Advisory Board has pinpointed ridge tops and steep slopes that haven't had a lot of development with large tracts of land."

The Agricultural Advisory Board is interested in protecting working farms, Trumpy said. Those two targets often coincide with large farm properties.

Henderson County is considering a similar program.

The grants that the county has made are matched by private donations to the land trusts and contributions by landowners.

In the case of Hemphill Farm, Hemphill and his heirs will continue to own the land and can live there but have simply given up the right to sell off sections for development.

In return, the landowners are eligible for tax deductions and credits that can be carried up to 15 years, Silverstein said.

Additional Facts

FARMLAND STUDY MEETINGS

Leah Mathews, a UNC Asheville economist, will present the Farmland Values Project findings, by county, at four upcoming public meetings:

Haywood County results, 7-8:30 tonight, Haywood County Cooperative Extension Center Auditorium, Waynesville.

Buncombe County results, 7-8:30 p.m. March 26, UNC Asheville's Reuter Center, rooms 102 A and B, just above Justice Center on campus.

Henderson County results, 7-8:30 p.m. April 2, Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center, 455 Research Drive, Mills River.

Madison County results, 7-8:30 pm. April 9, Madison County Cooperative Extension Center Auditorium, Marshall.

Mathews began the study in 2005 with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service. For more information, visit www.unca.edu/farmlandvalues or contact Mathews at 250-2302 or farmland@unca.edu.