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## Buncombe County helps preserve farms, views

*By Dale Neal*

Alma Spicer wanted her grandchildren to see the family farm the way she remembered it growing up in Fairview.

Buncombe County Commissioners approved \$356,000 for a conservation easement to preserve part of the Spicer farm on Garren Creek Road. Working with the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, the Spicer family decided to give up future rights to develop at least 170 acres of their property.

The commissioners approved an additional \$18,000 for a conservation easement on 40 acres on Early Mountain Road, protecting the scenic entry into the rural farming community of Sandy Mush. That agreement was brokered by the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy which has negotiated several easements preventing property in Sandy Mush from being sold off for subdivisions.

"This is the essence of giving back to the community," said David Gantt, the commission chairman. "You're giving back something that will last forever for your grandkids."

Property owners retain their title and the right to live on the property, but in a conservation easement, give up the right to sell the property for future development.

While many families approach a land trust with questions about tax credits, the Spicer family wanted to know more about what they were protecting, said Tom Fanslow of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy.

Hiring a botanist, the family discovered their farms and forests were home to a rare nesting site for sharp-shinned hawks, with only 20 nesting pairs in the state. The property also has groves of rare butternut trees and a 100-year-old specimen of the once common shingle oak, Fanslow said.

The Spicer family also set aside buffer zones that would block the view of any future homes that could be built on another 260 acres of their land from Garren Creek Road or from the nearby Pleasant Grove Baptist Church.

Another part of the property considered as prime agriculture soil could be returned to active farmland along the stream, providing food for local tailgate markets or restaurants.

In other business Tuesday:

- Commissioners approved extending the county ban on smoking inside county-owned buildings to include all county-owned property, including parks, as well as in county vehicles. The ordinance would take effect on Jan. 2, when a statewide ban on smoking in restaurants, bars and other public places goes into effect.

"Our effort is not to tell people they can or cannot smoke, but to protect people who don't smoke," said Gibbie Harris, Buncombe County Health Director, citing health risks from second-hand smoke.

- In public comment, commissioners heard from about two dozen residents opposed to countywide

zoning. Sporting "Let Us Vote" stickers, opponents urged a referendum on the controversial issue. "Property rights are central to our country," said Betty Jackson of West Buncombe County. "You should just let us vote."

The commissioners are moving ahead with reinstating countywide zoning after the state appeals court struck down the previous ordinance on technicalities.

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