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Saving mountains

JOURNAL EDITORIAL STAFF

Steps to preserve Grandfather Mountain in the Linville area and Surry County's Fisher Peak are all the more important in light of the status of a mountain development in Watauga and Wilkes counties. Northwest North Carolina must balance preservation and orderly development.

The development under construction along the border between Watauga and Wilkes, Laurelmor, is a 6,000-acre luxury golf resort. Ginn Development-related companies failed to make principal and interest payments on financing last year on Laurelmor and other Ginn properties. The ownership of Laurelmor, where sales stalled, has just been transferred to the Reynolds Signature Communities.

If Reynolds Signature makes the development a success, that will boost the tax base and bring jobs. But the company must also keep the project as environmentally responsible as possible. Reynolds Signature should follow through on Ginn's plans for establishing conservation easements covering about 2,700 acres on the property.

One of those easements, for more than 600 acres, has already been completed, said Walter Clark, the executive director of the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust. There's no reason to believe Reynolds Signature won't complete the other two easements. Any reduction in Ginn's original commitment would be troubling.

For the state's part, officials should make sure that the precious views from the Blue Ridge Parkway aren't marred and that a watershed, mountaintops and other irreplaceable natural features aren't compromised.

Economic development is important, but so is preserving the natural beauty that draws visitors and new residents in the first place. What's needed is well-regulated development. And it must be balanced with the kind of preservation that's happening at Grandfather Mountain and at Fisher's Peak, Surry County's highest point.

Grandfather Mountain moved one step closer to becoming a state park when the Council of State on Tuesday approved North Carolina's purchase of a large chunk of the property. That's a win for the state and the Morton family, which will continue to operate its popular tourist attraction on the mountain through a private, nonprofit organization.

In Surry County, the Piedmont Land Conservancy announced last week that it has bought a second tract on Fisher's Peak. Stunning views have been preserved, as well as flora and fauna. The peak is home to bears, as well as mountain laurel, rare grasses and chestnut trees.

And the latest purchase provides more protection to an area that contains the headwaters of 13 streams that drain into the Fisher River. The Fisher drains into the Yadkin River, which provides drinking water for millions of people in our region.

Groups like the land conservancy have scored several key preservation victories in the last few years. More are needed. Land preservation can be balanced with responsible development. The new owners of Laurelmor have the opportunity to set an example for such development.