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- Contact Information
- Advertising
- Classifieds
- Commercial Printing
- Community Events
- Newsroom
- Obituaries
- Society
- Sports
- Subscriptions
- Other Information
- Rate Card
- Front Page

Parkway expansion proposed

by Jule Hubbard

Coinciding with the Blue Ridge Parkway's 75th anniversary celebration, congressmen from North Carolina and Virginia on Tuesday introduced legislation that would protect as much as 50,000 acres along the 469-mile scenic highway.

Companion versions of the Blue Ridge Parkway Protection Act introduced in the House and the Senate would authorize \$75 million over five years to buy land adjacent to Parkway property.

"This new legislation authorizes the acquisition of property, but it doesn't actually provide the funds," said Parkway Superintendent Phil Francis in an interview this morning. Francis said additional legislation appropriating the money would have to be approved for the funds to be provided.

"But this is great and we appreciate the support. It's particularly important, here at the 75th anniversary of the Parkway, to recognize the need for protecting land along the Parkway for the next 75 years," he said.

The Parkway generates about \$2.3 billion annually in visitor spending in North Carolina and Virginia and Francis said scenic views are the primary draw for 90 percent of the 20 million visitors it draws annually.

"We would only buy property in cases where there is a willing seller," said Francis. The money would also likely be used to purchase conservation easements to protect view sheds in some situations, he added.

The legislation introduced Tuesday doesn't designate which parcels would be acquired with the money. It requires that they be contiguous to Parkway property and that acquisitions be voluntary and not taken through eminent domain.

He said officials have already started discussing the process of updating the Parkway's land protection plan, which identifies land with a higher priority for acquisition and includes consideration of land already identified as being available for purchase.

The 50,000 acres is the equivalent of 78 square miles, or adding one-quarter mile to the width of Parkway property along the entire highway.

Reid Wilson, executive director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, praised the efforts of the North Carolina delegation for supporting a "wise investment in the long-term health of the Parkway and the tourism economies of communities near this national treasure."

A large portion of additional land protected along the Parkway in recent years has been through the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. The nonprofit land trust sometimes buys property and deeds it to the federal government. Other times, it buys or receives donations of conservation easements that limit development of land.

The 75th anniversary celebration brings attention to the start of construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway in 1935 near Cumberland Knob in Alleghany County. The Parkway runs along or near most of the western and northern borders of Wilkes County.

Parkway officials and supporters said that private development has been eating away at the long-range scenic views that are the Parkway's main attraction. They say their ability to do anything about the erosion of the so-called "view shed" is limited.

The next step is for the bills to be considered by congressional committees—the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and the House Natural Resources Committee.



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