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Taylor family set to sell tract for conservation

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Real estate broker Steve Towe began exploring an 8,000-acre tract in Transylvania County last fall. He was coordinating negotiations between Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy and the family of former U.S. Rep. Charles Taylor, which owned the property, to preserve the land.

Towe was accompanied by Wildlife Resources Commission Wildlife Biologist Lori Williams. She had a feeling that the endangered green salamander might be on the property. The salamanders live in cool water under rock crevices.

"I went up Muir Creek, and within a few hours we found five green salamanders," Towe said. "It was some of the most fun I have had on this property."

CMLC is under contract to purchase the tract for \$33 million. The value is 40 to 50 percent less than the appraised value. The deal is expected to close in the fall. The Taylor family is allowing the entire cost of the land to be paid over a number of years, but did not specify the exact amount of time.

"Congressman Taylor, to his credit, has always been a conservationist," Towe said.

CMLC eventually wants to sell the property to the state, in order to allow public access.

If the deal is completed, the property will be preserved and species such as the green salamander will be preserved, CMLC Executive Director Kieran Roe said.

Taylor's son, Owen, attended the announcement of the acquisition Thursday. He recalls hiking and camping on the property since he was younger and was pleased that the land will be preserved. The family, he said, has been approached about selling the property to a development company but always resisted.

"We have had the tract for a significant amount of time, and it has had multiple uses," Owen said.

"We wanted to preserve it for the region because it was such a large tract. ... My dad had always thought of this as the natural heritage of our family, and he wanted to



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Owen Taylor, son of former Congressman Charles Taylor, front, and Kieran Roe, executive director of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, talk Thursday about 8,000 acres of land the Taylor family is selling to the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy. At left is one of many waterfalls on the property.

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preserve it for his children and grandchildren.”

Roe said the tract would most likely fall under the authority of the N.C. Wildlife Conservation Commission and become a game land.

“I think everybody's goal, including the family's, is that it remain usable for hunting and fishing,” Roe said, adding, “It's an amazing opportunity for conservation.”

Multiple uses

Owen said the family had explored other possible income sources from the property in recent years. A hunting club leases access to the land, and some logging activities have taken place. In the end, it was decided that a preservation deal was the best business decision for the family and would keep the tract from being subdivided.

Roe said the land is one of the largest single tracts of private land in Western North Carolina.

Towe said the land is a good option for large development because it's mostly level and has large open meadows. But he added that the land is pristine and has numerous water features that might make it difficult to develop.

“Transylvania County is a wonderful county,” he said.

“They call it ‘The Land of Waterfalls,’ and it will be more after this property.”

One of the significant features of the tract is Sassafras Mountain. The conserved tract occupies the northern end of the mountain, which is the highest point in South Carolina. It is bordered by the Jocassee Gorges Management Area, Greenville Watershed and the Watson-Cooper Heritage Preserve in South Carolina.

A section of the 80-mile Foothills Trail also runs through the tract.

CMLC is partnering with the Conservation Fund to purchase the property. CMLC is seeking private funding sources to purchase the property and has submitted a \$5.4 million application to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. Roe, however, understands that getting money from the state could be challenging.

“Right now, the state budget situation is tight,” he said.

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