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### Deal protects land in McDowell from development

From Staff Reports

A vast tract of land, 1,488 acres, owned by CSX Corp. in McDowell County, has been permanently placed off limits to development or logging, through a deal brokered by the Conservation Trust of North Carolina.

Part of a centuries-old trail that played a role in the American Revolution has won permanent protection and, eventually, public access, if all goes according to plan.

The state of North Carolina completed the agreement on Sept. 4. A permanent conservation easement will protect the property from development and logging, while CSX will continue to own the land, operate the rail line and pay relevant property taxes. CTNC will manage the easement and monitor the property annually under an agreement with the state Department of Cultural Resources.

Much of the tract borders the Blue Ridge Parkway, and more of it is part of the view as seen from the parkway's overlooks.

CTNC has been working on the deal for more than six years, according to a press release.

In exchange for ceding control of the land, CSX received \$3.67 million. CTNC Executive Director Reid Wilson told The McDowell News that the state and federal governments contributed 56 percent of the total. The remaining 46 percent was raised by through CTNC efforts.

The Altapass Orchard Foundation and Overmountain Victory Trail Association made substantial contributions. Fred and Alice Stanback and Bill and Nancy Stanback, all of Salisbury, made generous donations to CTNC for this project.

The tract encompasses dramatic forested mountain views from Milepost 325 to Milepost 329.5 of the Parkway, including some of its most popular overlooks. This kind of scenery, according to state data, is the strongest draw for tourism in North Carolina â a \$17 billion industry that employs 200,000 people.

The Parkway alone attracts nearly 20 million visitors and contributes more than \$2 billion to the regional economy each year.

The property also includes about 1.5 miles of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, the route followed by mountain militiamen during the American Revolution on their way to the pivotal Battle of Kings Mountain in South Carolina.

"This agreement accomplishes so much more than lasting protection of a beautiful place. It safeguards drinking water for a million people downstream. It preserves uniquely American history and culture. And conserving the spectacular vistas and opening the Overmountain Victory Trail will boost tourism,

providing jobs and a lasting economic benefit to local communities," said Wilson.

This section of the Overmountain Victory Trail, the only National Historic Trail that passes through North Carolina, is not currently open to the public. The conservation agreement allows improvements to be made that will enable the public to hike the trail, and the trail will connect with another property recently protected by CTNC, the Rose Creek tract, so that there will be three miles total of new public trail access.

The property also connects critical habitat in the Pisgah National Forest to the Blue Ridge Parkway and other protected areas. The site contains all or part of two state Significant Natural Heritage Areas, with mature native forests. It also has more than seven miles of headwaters streams of the Catawba River that provide clean drinking water for more than one million residents in communities downstream and critical habitat to North Carolina's declining trout population.

State Rep. Mitch Gillespie, R-Marion, called the deal a "win-win."

"The protection of this property is a wonderful public-private partnership that saves the natural and cultural heritage of this region from hundreds of years ago," said Gillespie, "and since the land will still be owned by CSX Corp., they'll continue to pay taxes and employ local people, supporting our local economy."

The Conservation Trust for North Carolina assists, promotes and represents North Carolina's 24 local land trusts, which have protected more than 309,000 acres in over 1,700 places across the state. It also is dedicated to protecting the Blue Ridge Parkway's natural and scenic corridor. CTNC has protected more than 30,000 acres in over 40 locations along the Parkway.