

[Back to article](#)



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# TN EDITORIAL: CMLC deal good for land, economy

*Published: Friday, November 13, 2009 at 4:30 a.m.*

Conservationists are right to try to grab the Gray Rock property while the price is right.

Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy is hoping to buy 1,500 acres near Lake Lure and Chimney Rock State Park, including Gray Rock and land around it that was originally slated to be part of a development, for \$2.53 million.

The land is part of one of the largest undisturbed tracts of land in the region and is important for wildlife protection and water quality, said CMLC Executive Director Kieran Roe. It's currently tied up in bankruptcy court as part of a failed high-end development.

The nonprofit could have just sat back and held its money, waiting for the economy to pick up. Instead, the board chose to act and save a good deal that otherwise would have died. The organization is smart to take advantage of the situation, despite the challenges.

"It has been a struggle," Roe said. "But if we did not purchase the property, in five years we would be saying we missed out on an opportunity."

Before the bankruptcy, the Nature Conservancy had been negotiating a way to buy and preserve the land, which had been bought by Florida land development company Land Resources. In all, Land Resources bought 4,000 acres near Lake Lure to build the Gray Rock at Lake Lure subdivision.

The Nature Conservancy already owns a 1,300-acre parcel that abuts Gray Rock and wanted to create a larger tract. Through the bankruptcy court, a deal was negotiated where the Nature Conservancy would purchase about 1,400 acres of the development, and another company, Evdevo, would purchase the unsold lots.

The sale was slated to close in September, but the Nature Conservancy backed out

because of the economy. Instead, it contacted CMLC about buying the land.

One of the bright spots in this dim economy is that conservation groups can snag land for cheaper prices. A less bright one is that monetary donations to land trusts are down, and CMLC needs \$300,000 to complete the deal.

We hope they can find the money, or that donors will step forward to offer support. It's too good a deal to pass up -- and not just because of the price tag.

The project is about even more than the land. Several companies have filed liens against the developer for work they haven't been paid for. Money from the CMLC purchase will pay off some of the debt. And with the developer bankrupt and in prison awaiting trial for allegedly killing his wife, the land deal looks like the only way these companies - and their workers -- will get paid.

Chimney Rock's future could also hang in the balance. CMLC hopes to one day sell or deed the land to the state to become a part of the park, which it helped establish. The state doesn't have the money, and CMLC is a last resort.

The project is another example of the generosity of local residents and their desire to enjoy and protect the land of Western North Carolina. Preserving Gray Rock and our beloved mountain land is worth the challenge.

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