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Parkway aims to save vistas

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Editor's note: This is the third story in a yearlong series the Citizen-Times is writing about the 75th anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway, ending with the final celebration on Sept. 11, 2010.

Private development is eating away at the Blue Ridge Parkway's biggest asset, and parkway managers say their ability to do anything about it is limited.

Surveys show that long-range scenic views are the main reason people visit the parkway — and they are not coming to see trophy homes on ridge tops.

Standing at the parkway's Bad Fork Overlook near Bent Creek Gap southwest of Asheville, Hendersonville resident Henry Simmons said recently he visits the parkway "just to see the sights, to see the way the overlooks look at different times of the day."

Much of the land along the parkway "is already developing," Simmons said. "At some of the lookouts, you can just see the difference."

The rapid escalation of home prices and home construction that Western North Carolina saw during most of this decade has brought more large homes to areas easily seen from the parkway.

Figures compiled by Knoxville, Tenn.-based The Market Edge say the number of residential units permitted in 10 WNC counties jumped 31.4 percent from 2003 to 2006 alone.

Development pressure has eased dramatically since the 2006 peak as the housing market has declined. No one can say with certainty when or whether the demand for new homes at high elevation will return, but there is concern the next round of construction will further erode the natural character of many parkway vistas.

"The pattern from past decades in this geographic area has been a cycle where there'll be a lot of interest and investment in developing out new communities and then there'll be a time when that is less intense," said Carl Silverstein, executive director of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, a land trust.

Then, Silverstein said, interest returns. "Each time it's come back, it's been more acute."

Leah Greden Mathews, a UNC Asheville economics professor who has studied parkway view issues, said upper-end, upper-elevation development "may not come back anytime soon."

But, she says, "We should be thinking in our community about where we want development and where we don't."

Buncombe County is set to adopt a zoning ordinance Tuesday with provisions designed to limit the visibility of views along the parkway, but Buncombe is an exception among counties along the scenic road.

The big attraction

The parkway is unusual among national parks in that it stretches for 469 miles through two states, but, according to Gary Johnson, chief of resource planning, its average width is only about 800 feet.

That means that most of the land that visitors see when they pull off at a parkway overlook is owned by someone else.

In addition, those views are an unusually large part of the parkway's appeal compared to other national parks. It is possible to hike to a waterfall, tour a historic building or spot wildlife along the Blue Ridge Parkway just as it is in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, but those are not the main reasons most people come to the scenic highway.

"Depending on which study you look at ... anywhere from 85 percent to 95 percent of the visitors we surveyed come here primarily for the scenic drive," Johnson said.

Views of adjacent land are "the heart and soul of the park," parkway Superintendent Phil Francis said.

"We'd been on here before. We knew that it's got great views," said Atlanta resident Graham Schofield, explaining why he chose a parkway overlook to watch a recent sunset.

A 2003 study done by Mathews and others of parkway visitors' attitudes found that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed noticed changes along the section of the parkway from Asheville north to the North Carolina-Virginia state line.

Residential development from either subdivisions or single homes was the change causing the greatest concern among a total of 34 percent of respondents, followed by air pollution at 22 percent.

Those surveyed said they would be willing to pay \$151 in taxes annually to preserve the parkway's scenic quality.

Conversely, study authors said a large portion of visitors would stop coming to the parkway if scenic quality declines. That in turn would reduce the \$2.3 billion that parkway visitors spend each year on their trips.

Moral suasion

Some parkway views are likely to have a mostly natural character for the foreseeable future.

About a third of the parkway is bordered by national forest, Johnson said, and U.S. Forest Service officials are "really good" about consulting parkway officials to minimize impacts when a timber sale or other change on forest land is planned near the parkway.

Some, however, are in more peril. The views that parkway visitors value are also valuable to homebuyers and thus to developers.

"If you have a home near a protected area like the park or a national forest or property with a conservation easement on it, property values tend to rise," Mathews said.

Changes in parkway views have been a particular concern in Virginia, where Mathews said the main threat comes on relatively flat privately owned land along the parkway that can be easily converted to residential or commercial use.

The worry in much of WNC has more to do with homes on the sides or tops of ridges, although development is also changing valleys visible below the parkway.

Johnson said the parkway buys four or five tracts of land along its boundaries each year at a cost of

about \$200,000 to \$250,000.

Parkway officials try to have discussions with developers to work out ways that property can be used while minimizing changes to parkway views, but the parkway has no legal authority to regulate building outside its borders.

Developers do not always follow the parkway's suggestions, Johnson said, but the talks usually result in a compromise of some sort.

"We think it's a successful day when a developer will invite us in to discuss our concerns," he said.

Parkway officials are not trying to prevent all change along the road's length, Francis said.

"We're not against development. We're for smart development," he said.

Counties on the spot

County governments do have the authority to regulate land use along the parkway. Most of those in WNC have no zoning in rural areas, but some have ordinances regulating building on steep slopes or location of new communication towers that can provide some protection for parkway views.

The North Carolina ridge law prohibits most buildings more than 40 feet tall on ridges greater than 3,000 feet in elevation. That prevents construction of structures like the 10-story Avery County mountaintop condominiums that prompted the law's passage but does not affect the typical single-family home.

The zoning ordinance that Buncombe County commissioners are scheduled to give final approval to on Tuesday requires that main buildings near the parkway be set back at least 50 feet from the parkway property line and limits the height of those buildings to 40 feet.

The rules, which are based on similar city of Asheville rules, generally do not apply if the buildings could not be seen from the parkway, said county Zoning Administrator Jim Coman.

Buncombe's ordinance is unusual, however, as WNC residents historically have had a strong aversion to land-use controls in rural areas.

In Watauga County, "There's been a push and a push back" on the issue of zoning, said Joe Furman, the county's director of planning and inspection. Some rural areas of the county have zoning, but not those closest to the parkway roadway.

In Haywood County, "There's no discussion of that topic," said Planning Director Kris Boyd.

The issue can be a complicated one for counties. The parkway's intent was in large part to boost the economies of areas along its length, and development is a part of that.

Plus, so much land is visible from the parkway that it is difficult to imagine tough restrictions that would cover it all. Although in many cases landmarks are at some distance, one can see perhaps half or two-thirds of Buncombe County from various points along the parkway, including landmarks like downtown Asheville, the Biltmore House, Progress Energy's Skyland plant and Interstate 26.

"I don't always think zoning is the best answer," Johnson said.

Instead, the parkway relies on nonprofit land trusts to help acquire development rights or full ownership of sensitive tracts and is developing guidelines for development near the scenic highway.

The Conservation Trust of North Carolina is trying to build support for a state measure that would provide \$75 million to protect land along the road, Francis said.

The development guidelines should be available next year, Johnson said. They will rely on persuasion, not coercion, he said.

"We're really trying to speak more to the developers, the builders, than we are the counties," he said. "We're trying to provide information to people that I think will help protect views and scenic quality."

Additional Facts

Visitors, views and dollars

Following are findings from a 2003 survey of people visiting the Blue Ridge Parkway between Asheville and the North Carolina-Virginia state line.

Most common activity on the trip

Visiting a scenic area 30 percent

Hiking 15 percent

Touring 14 percent

Relaxing 8 percent

Camping 8 percent

Visiting shops/craft galleries 7 percent

Family outing 7 percent

All others 10 percent

Greatest concerns among changes seen

Air pollution 22 percent

Housing subdivisions 19 percent

Single houses 15 percent

Telecommunications towers 6 percent

Logging 5 percent

Commercial signs 4 percent

Road cuts 4 percent

Power lines 2 percent

Electric transmission towers 1 percent

Saw no changes 19 percent

Other 2 percent

Spending during trip

Lodging \$209

Food and drink \$144

Souvenirs, other retail items \$111

Gas, other travel expenses \$94

Other \$52

Total \$603

Note: Individual items do not add up to total due to rounding.
