



December 28, 2009

Blue Ridge Forever works toward goal of protecting 50,000 acres

By Clarke Morrison

As Blue Ridge Forever enters the final year of its campaign to protect 50,000 acres in Western North Carolina from development, organizers are hopeful their goal is within reach.

The coalition of 10 land trusts expects to have protected more than 40,000 acres by the end of this year, either by purchasing pristine tracts or obtaining conservation easements on land that remains in private hands, said campaign director Phyllis Stiles.

"We're cautiously optimistic," she said of the effort launched in 2006. "We worked really hard to come up with a vision that linked habitats together, and that's good for people and animals."

Last year's downturn in the economy aided the campaign as developers abandoned plans for construction projects. On the other hand, the state's budget crunch dried up a crucial source of funding for land purchases, Stiles said.

"You can imagine what a blow it is when North Carolina suspends that funding," Stiles said. "We know that next year is going to be the same.

"The silver lining is that some developers have decided not to proceed with their developments because of the economic climate, and they are approaching land trusts with deals that are too good to be true."

Two years ago, Becky Anderson put her 45-acre farm in the Spring Creek area of Madison County under a conservation easement with help from the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, one of the Blue Ridge Forever partners.

That forever put the land, which Anderson's family has owned for generations, off limits to development, but she can continue farming.

Conservation easements allow willing property owners to get partial compensation for the value of their property or tax benefits in return for giving up the right to develop or subdivide the land. The owner can keep the property in the family or sell it, but subsequent owners remain bound by the easement requirements.

"I really believe that our ridgelines have to stay intact or we will destroy them," Anderson said. "You can also still earn a living off the property. In order to preserve farms you need to be able to make a living off them."

Stiles said Blue Ridge Forever was formed when it became apparent that rapid development in the mountains was gobbling up natural spaces and spoiling views. Over the past two decades, the amount of developed land in the Southern Blue Ridge has increased by 77 percent, while North Carolina's population is expected to increase by 50 percent from 2000-30, according to the group.

So the conservation groups decided to band together, launching the five-year campaign on Jan. 1, 2006, in a shared vision for protecting more land more quickly, Stiles said. The plan includes 28 focus areas including the Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Trail and Highlands of Roan.

“These are very, very significant, biologically rich areas,” she said. “We really looked from sort of an eagle eye point of view down on the landscape and tried to see how we could make more connections. The biggest problem for wildlife is fragmented habitat and encroachment of development on their habitat.”

Asheville resident Laura Webb said her family decided to place 604 acres out of about 1,000 it owns in the Cashiers area of Jackson County under a conservation easement. She has fond memories of hiking and fishing there as a child.

“The development up there was phenomenal, people plopping houses on the edge of mountains,” Webb said. “It’s property we know and love. We didn’t want to see all of that developed.”

Stiles said the coalition is continuing to work hard on land conservation.

“In our final push, 50,000 acres is an important goal,” she said. “But we have another 50,000 that is worthy of protection, so we need people’s help to do this.”

For more information about Blue Ridge Forever call 253-0095 or go to www.blueridgeforever.info.
