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Groups seek conservation bond issue

Cost of land for open space reported up 300% in decade

WADE RAWLINS, Staff Writer

The cost of buying land to create parks, protect drinking water and preserve open space has increased nearly 300 percent in 10 years, say groups seeking additional state spending on land and water conservation.

Kate Dixon, executive director of Land for Tomorrow, a statewide environmental partnership, said her group reviewed all purchases of land by state agencies for conservation purposes such as parks, game lands and beach access from 1996 to 2005. The group found that the average price paid per acre had increased from \$699 in 1996-97 to \$2,691 in 2004-05.

Dixon presented the information to a House committee Tuesday to press the case for a bond referendum this year to fund conservation projects.

"It makes a lot of financial sense to borrow money now when prices are lower," Dixon said. "This price increase is equivalent to a \$100,000 house in 1996 being worth \$385,000 in 10 years."

Conservation groups are seeking \$1 billion in additional spending over five years. But they are competing with a broad variety of interests pressing lawmakers. Other advocacy groups are lobbying the legislature for about \$3 billion in bond money to finance housing, schools and water and sewer systems.

Legislative leaders such as Rep. Bill Owens, chairman of the House Rules Committee, said the state needs to prepare for projected population growth by building schools and parks and upgrading water and sewer systems. But Owens said those requests must be weighed after lawmakers address a priority issue, which is to restructure the funding of the state Medicaid system. Owens said it's not certain whether they'll get around to a pulling together a bond referendum this year.

"It's still a question," Owens said. "We have a lot of issues on our plate -- how to balance the budget, properly fund education and deal with the Medicaid issue with the counties."

A state land and water conservation study commission looked at ways to boost state efforts to acquire land for conservation. In 1999, state leaders set a goal of protecting 1 million acres within 10 years. But after seven years, that initiative is behind schedule. Public and private efforts to date have protected about 405,000 acres, a 2006 state report said.

The study commission recommended the \$1 billion in additional spending over five years. The bonds would be used to help buy and protect about 740,000 acres of lands, including 6,000 miles of buffers along rivers and streams to filter pollution and protect water quality.

Bills introduced in the House and Senate have a bipartisan majority of members in each chamber as co-sponsors. But a similar proposal last year stalled because of concerns by Gov. Mike Easley about increasing the state's debt. The bills are on hold until legislative leaders decide whether to proceed with a bond vote this year.

In his budget, Easley recommended \$106 million for open-space and farmland preservation, encouraging backers of open-space bonds that the state's chief executive recognizes the need for some spending to preserve land.

Staff writer Wade Rawlins can be reached at 829-4528 or wade.rawlins@newsobserver.com.

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