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Plan to conserve land stuck in limbo

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Despite support from more than half the state's legislators, measures to put a \$1 billion conservation bond referendum before N.C. voters remain in a holding pattern.

Legislators grappling with rising Medicaid costs and other issues say they still hope to take action this session. The measures stalled last year when lawmakers decided the state couldn't afford to take on more debt.

Supporters say they can only hope the conservation bonds get a hearing before the session ends this summer.

"I feel like we're on a roller coaster," said Kate Dixon of Land for Tomorrow, a coalition pushing for more conservation spending. "The real fear is they're going to go home without doing anything about it."

House and Senate bills would let voters decide whether the state should issue up to \$1 billion in general obligation bonds over five years. Twenty-eight Senate members and 65 from the House co-sponsored the bills.

A joint legislative commission also recommended, in January, that the state find \$1 billion over five years for conservation and historic preservation.

Conservationists say the need is growing dire.

The price of conservation land nearly quadrupled over the past decade, Land for Tomorrow says. State agencies paid an average of \$699 an acre in 1996-97, its analysis found. By 2004-05, the average had rocketed to \$2,691.

Requests for grants from the four state trust funds that finance conservation acquisitions outpaced available money by \$335 million last year, the group says.

State spending to buy former International Paper land and Chimney Rock, a famed tourist attraction in the mountains, have taken millions of dollars out of the trust funds, Dixon said. Undeveloped land offered by timber companies and utilities keeps flooding the market.

"It means that if there's no additional influx of revenue, essentially we have to step back and do nothing for a year," she said. "There continues to be so much land on the market that we stand to lose it."

If current trends don't change, says the advocacy group Environment North Carolina, the state will lose at least 2 million acres of forests and farms to development over the next two decades.

But conservation bonds have competitors, including proposals for \$2 billion in bonds for schools and \$1 billion for water and sewer needs. And state Treasurer Richard Moore says North Carolina can afford no more than \$384 million a year in new debt over the next decade.

Rep. Lucy Allen, a primary sponsor of the conservation bonds, said they have "as good a chance as any of the bond proposals."

"The future has no constituents here to speak for it," added Allen, a Democrat from Louisburg. "We have to be the ones that look forward."

Bond proponents are united by projections that the state's population will grow by 4 million people by 2030, increasing development, crowding schools and clogging roads.

High land costs make it harder and harder to stretch state grants to acquire property, said Davis Cable of the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

The state Clean Water Management Trust Fund has been a key source. But "even at full funding of

\$100 million (a year), half of it going to land conservation, it just doesn't go that far over 100 counties," Cable said.

Efforts are under way to come up with local money to leverage state grants.

The conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, which has a Charlotte office, are leading a 15-county initiative to help local governments build a web of greenways. A private fundraising campaign for the Carolina Thread Trail greenways hopes to raise \$30 million to \$40 million.

Spending Options

\$699

average per-acre amount state agencies paid for conservation land, 1996-97

\$2,691

per-acre average paid, 2004-05

\$335 MILLION

gap between grant requests and grants made by four state conservation trust funds, 2006

\$4 BILLION

in bond proposals before legislators for conservation, schools, water and sewer

\$384 MILLION

per-year limit on new debt recommended by state treasurer