

Editorial:

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Land rush

Soaring land prices in the Triangle make it much harder to find property for public uses, such as schools

The Triangle is by no means a southern-fried version of the average New Jersey township. But don't blink. A scary fact reported in a recent N&O article noted that last August, there were 130 undeveloped parcels of land in Wake County that covered 100 acres or more and were owned by a single private entity. In 2000, the figure had been 412 such properties.

That's a problem for school systems that need land for new buildings, or for municipalities seeking recreational space for the new residents pouring into their borders. Finding land that can be easily acquired gets harder, and the scarcity also means prices can be especially burdensome or even out of reach.

In just four years, to illustrate the trend, the cost of Wake tracts in the 23- to 100-acre range was up 25 percent, to \$35,674 an acre. A real estate research firm tells the newspaper that in southwest Wake, the per-acre price has more than doubled in just two years, to \$53,502.

The main reason for the scarcity is the development of land for homes and businesses. It's not just a Triangle problem. There's plenty of empty land in counties toward the coast, for instance. But The N&O last year documented the break-neck pace of development up and down the waterways of eastern counties. North Carolina is a popular destination state for families as well as retirees. The demand for developable land isn't likely to abate soon.

Absent creative deal-making, it simply becomes more and more difficult to find suitable land for public purposes.

Local governments can float bonds or raise taxes to pay for the purchases, and as a last resort can use their powers of condemnation (although a fair price must be offered). But the burden on taxpayers grows heavier and heavier.

The state, for that matter, is in a similar spot. Despite several worthwhile additions to the state's parkland portfolio, a plan to acquire a million acres of open space, presented toward the end of Governor Hunt's tenure nearly a decade ago, is still more a hope than a dream nearly realized.

Creativity on the part of governments and land conservancy groups that help the public acquire open spaces is called for, and fortunately there have been some good examples of that. Conservation groups on local and state levels have worked with private owners -- sometimes developers -- in ways that benefit both sides. Cooperation, not competition, ought to be the first tactic.

Whatever route is taken, the state's lawmakers should fully debate bills in both chambers of the General Assembly that would ask voters to approve \$1 billion in land-buying bonds. Once developed, land is gone. And prices for what's left won't become any cheaper. The time to is now for aggressive steps to safeguard land so it can meet the public's future needs.

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