

New conservation coalition pushes referendum

By Scott Nicholson

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A large-scale conservation initiative has the goal of putting \$1 billion dollars into a fund that would protect the state's land and water resources over the next five years.

Land for Tomorrow, a coalition of conservation and civic groups, is advocating a bond referendum that supporters say will beef up land protection. The group describes itself as "a diverse partnership of local governments businesses, conservationists, farmers, environmental groups, health professionals and community groups committed to educating North Carolinians about the importance of protecting places that matter, and securing support from the General Assembly to make these issues a priority."

Kay Dixon, executive director of Land for Tomorrow, said, "We're pushing different legislators to go ahead and do this. We're asking for additional money for land and water conservation."

Currently, the state maintains four trust funds dedicated to conservation efforts. They include the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, which protects land along rivers and streams; the Natural Heritage Area fund that protects exceptional and historic properties; Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, which is used to buy property set aside as parks and natural areas; and the Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. Designed to purchase conservation easements that would allow farms to continue to be used for crop, livestock and timber production while saving them from development.

Dixon said the last fund, in particular, has been underutilized. About \$160 million a year currently rolls into the four trust funds, and the referendum would more than double that to \$360 million per year over the next five years.

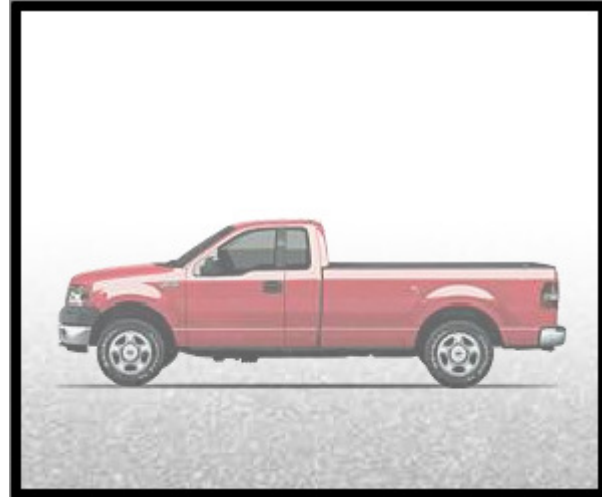
"We've worked with a lot of people on this," Dixon said, noting she was in Boone for the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the High Country Conservancy. "We realize there's so much development pressure in North Carolina. If we don't do more to conserve land now, it will only get more expensive. This is the best time because more land is available now."

Dixon cited a report that showed the cost of conservation land had risen 285 percent in the last decade and is now approaching \$3,000 per acre.

In 1999, the state adopted a "Million Acre" initiative to set aside that much land for permanent protection. Dixon said it made financial sense to purchase now, even with borrowed money, because the cost of land is increasing faster than interest rates.

High Country Conservancy, which is one of the partnering agencies in the effort, backs the need to for immediate action. "We are actively involved," said HCC director Teresa Buckwalter. "We're asking our membership and local folks to ask the legislature to let people decide what the future will be."

She said conservation efforts are important to the tourism and agricultural economy, and the same pressure that



exists statewide will be equally intense, if not more, in the mountains. She said higher land costs and big population increases will only make conservation increasingly difficult. "It will be much more of a challenge to do it in the future," Buckwalter said.

Land for Tomorrow advocates what it calls investments in school construction, roads, affordable housing and water and sewer infrastructure, claiming the state is bracing for a "population tsunami" of 12 million additional residents by 2030 — a 50-percent increase.

The growth, says the group, would place pressure on land and water resources and the partnership is asking the General Assembly to explore bond referenda, local option land transfer taxes, impact fees and the highway use tax to provide capital for the efforts.

"People across the state really seem to support this," Dixon said. "It's across the spectrum. Democrat, Republican, rural, urban. People realize the environment is a real driver of the economy and one of the things that makes the state so special.

"People also see land protection is important to water quality, and everybody understands the need for clean water," she said.

Dixon said the partnership is lobbying for a referendum next May, but is concerned the debate over Medicaid will overshadow the conservation needs, at least in the current budget negotiations.

"We started the (legislative) session with a majority of the House and Senate signing on," she said. "It's recently slowed down. The fear is they will go home (on break) without dealing with it."