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Article published Aug 2, 2007

Conservation goals won't be reached easily

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Barring a dramatic turnaround, North Carolina isn't likely to meet its ambitious goal of preserving by 2009 1 million acres of land from residential and commercial development.

Since its inception in 1999, the N.C. One Million Acre Initiative has protected less than half that amount. That doesn't come even close to matching the state's annual development rate of 100,000 acres.

While the statewide totals are disappointing, there's been notable progress locally. The \$10 million that Guilford County voters approved two years ago is being spent wisely to protect dwindling open space.

But to get more bang for the buck, state and local initiatives need to be better coordinated. Piggybacking money from state trusts, local funding and conservation groups will make the task easier amid rising land costs.

Mindful of the overall poor showing, the General Assembly this session pumped some new life into the lagging conservation effort.

The freshly approved state budget includes \$8 million for the relatively new Farmland Preservation Trust. In our area, funds from the trust already have been used to buy land for parks and walking trails.

Yet, while not insignificant, that amount only scratches the surface. An all-encompassing statewide conservation program could cost upwards of \$1 billion and require referendum approval to issue bonds.

Voters, for the most part, look kindly on conservation initiatives, but the staggering cost may raise doubts. Other possibilities, such as higher water-use fees or a hotel-motel occupancy tax that single out property owners and tourists, rightly have elicited little support.

So, until the funding dilemma is resolved, conservationists must make do with fewer-than-optimum dollars. Making those funds go further depends on wise expenditures and better teamwork among worthy existing programs.

Developing land and protecting it aren't mutually exclusive. With sufficient long-range planning, acreage can be preserved so that it is compatible with acceptable growth.

One alternative worth pursuing is conservation easements. Farmland, for example, can continue in use with the understanding it eventually will be set aside. Elaborate rules protect against misusing

easements to obstruct worthwhile projects that create jobs and enhance communities.

Development is inevitable, but safeguards must be in place to protect the environment. Because land is a finite resource, we must use it wisely. It's going to be expensive, but the state must act now to ensure that future generations have room to live and grow.

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