

[Back](#)

---

Article published Dec 27, 2006

## Million-acre plan well short of goal

**By Jason Hardin**

Staff Writer

It was an audacious plan.

Preserve 1 million acres — an area roughly the size of Alamance, Guilford and Rockingham counties combined — by the end of 2009.

The thinking was that as the state's population booms, the time to keep land undeveloped is now, not later.

But so far, the state is lagging behind the goal set by legislators in 2000.

At the end of 2005, the most recent total available, a little more than 400,000 acres had been preserved.

"That is a concern," said Janine Nicholson, who is involved with outreach and education for the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources. "2009 isn't going to be an easy target."

The problem with the pace is twofold, she said.

The first part of the problem: Development is taking place so rapidly that much of the land that might be preserved is becoming homes and schools and businesses.

Margaret Hartzell, who works with Environmental North Carolina, a private advocacy group, said an average of nearly 400 acres is developed in the state each day.

North Carolina is on its way to catching big states such as Ohio and Michigan in population in the next few decades, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and all those people take up space.

"It's just an astounding number," Hartzell said. "We just continue to build strip malls and parking lots."

In fact, each person moving to the state takes up an estimated 2 acres by the time all is said and done, Nicholson said. That means less land is available to preserve.

"We can't afford to wait," she said. "It won't be there for the taking. "

The second part of the problem: the price of land.

Money is an issue, she said. The more time that goes by, the more it costs to buy each acre.

"We really need it to be done sooner rather than later," Nicholson said. "Later would be too late. "

The preservation effort also is a way for people to have a greater voice in development, she said. Often, residents watch as land is developed and assume they have no say in how their community will look in the

future, she said, but with mechanisms available to preserve land, that's not the case.

A state commission has been studying the issue and has written a report calling for an additional \$1 billion to be spent on protecting land over the next five years.

To raise extra funds, the report suggests a number of potential tax increases. The options range from raising the income tax and sales tax to creating new fees for building permits and landfill use.

The report notes that there is a particular urgency now. Large landowners in big traditional industries — timber, tobacco and power — are selling off land in large chunks.

Many of the state's waterways don't have good water quality, the report notes, and preserving land along rivers and lakes would help improve or stabilize the situation.

Advocates also note other reasons for preserving the land.

The state is known for its natural beauty, Hartzell said. No one wants to see that disappear, she said.

Preserving land will make a tangible difference in residents' lives, she said.

"It's something the people of North Carolina want to see happen," Hartzell said. "You will see a difference."

A tax increase to pay for the program might generate a fight, however.

Dallas Woodhouse, a spokesman for Americans for Prosperity of North Carolina, a group that favors limited government and cutting taxes, said legislators are considering tax increases for other purposes already.

"There are already a lot of signals ... that there are a lot of tax increases on the table," he said.

Woodhouse said there is no shortage of open land in North Carolina.

If the land preservation program is important enough to do, he said, do it but without a tax increase.

"The taxpayers of North Carolina have been loaded up on in the last couple years," he said.

The commission is scheduled to present its report to the General Assembly early next year.

Contact Jason Hardin at 373-7021 or [jhardin@news-record.com](mailto:jhardin@news-record.com)