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State debt may delay land conservation plans

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RALEIGH — Just as property development gobbles up the state's cropland and forests, legislative budgets are consuming much of the state's debt capacity that could be used to preserve open spaces.

To raise money for land preservation, lawmakers and a private group are considering a large bond package that would pay for a mix of statewide needs.

Identical bills pending in the House and Senate would let voters authorize \$1 billion in bonds over five years to preserve farmland and forests. The money would go to state trusts and pay landowners who agree not to develop their property.

At first glance, it would seem the bills would easily pass — the House bill was co-sponsored by 65 of 120 members, and 28 of 50 senators co-sponsored the Senate version.

But both chambers have since passed proposed budgets with large amounts of debt for university expansions, prisons and other projects, leaving little room, if any, for debt proposed in the land preservation bills. Meanwhile, the state loses an estimated 100,000 acres yearly.

"It definitely concerns us. We feel like the university definitely has needs, but also the state has incredibly important needs, not just land conservation but also infrastructure," said Kate Dixon, executive director of Land for Tomorrow, a private conservation group based in Durham. "We need to see some action soon. I'm eager to see what action the governor and the legislature will take."

Gov. Mike Easley proposed \$100 million in his recommended budget that would let the state buy land for preservation. The money would be raised through debt that does not require voter approval.

The House budget includes \$8.5 million for the Farm Preservation Trust Fund, shifting the money from the Tobacco Trust Fund.

Dixon praised the House budget, saying farm preservation has become a priority since North Carolina led the nation in 2005 with 1,000 lost farms.

But neither budget provides nearly the amount that a joint legislative committee recommended for land preservation. The Senate budget includes \$1.2 billion in debt — none approved by voters — all going to universities, prisons and state buildings with none for land preservation.

House leaders have said the Senate's budget contains too much debt. The budget appears headed to a committee of House and Senate budget negotiators to resolve differences before the fiscal year ends June 30. Bond debt usually is considered separately from the budget, but lawmakers must still designate a source to repay the debt.

Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand, a Fayetteville Democrat, said the Senate's proposed debt doesn't leave much room for additional debt.

“Until we find a source of revenue to pay those things, we’re kind of tapped out because of the borrowing for schools and prisons,” Rand said. “Truth be told, we probably spent too much.”

Rand supports the land preservation bills and is among the Senate co-sponsors.

“We’ll certainly do what we can. It’s a most worthwhile bill,” he said. “I hope we can do it.”

He said lawmakers are studying conservation needs in a comprehensive debt plan that would include funding for schools, housing and other capital projects.

Lawmakers created land and water trust funds several years ago to preserve natural resources. Edgar Miller, a lobbyist for the private Conservation Trust for North Carolina that supports the trusts, said the idea of bundling bond projects is gaining momentum.

“The talk right now is really more about a bond package that would include several things, including infrastructure,” Miller said. “It could be somewhere in the framework of \$3 billion to \$5 billion. Obviously, some sort of revenue source is going to be needed, and that’s where politics comes into play.”

He said the newly formed Partnership for North Carolina will begin promoting a bond plan to address conservation and other needs.

Candace Williams, who coordinates land protection in the Fayetteville office of the Sandhills Area Land Trust, a private group, said she sees firsthand the loss of undeveloped land and the need to preserve open space. The private, nonprofit Environment North Carolina projects the state will lose 2 million acres in the next 20 years.

“So many of our farmers are unable to keep their farms,” she said. “If you look at the projections for the next 20 years, that alone should shock everybody to death and make them realize now is the time to get something done.”

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