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## **Our View: Urbanization of farm and forest won't hold off for better times.**

For North Carolina lawmakers, the days of expansive promises are gone and the days of making the books balance are at hand. There will be undeserving casualties.

Judging by the heavy hints being dropped strewn around the legislature, popular bills for conserving open space will be among them.

The state isn't going broke and there are in fact companion bills that would allow the voters to authorize \$1 billion in bonds for farm-and-forest preservation. Both bills have many sponsors and large followings. But some of the biggest big-ticket items in the budget now under consideration will depend on debt, and key lawmakers are wrinkling their noses at the five-year outlay for the Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.

Gov. Mike Easley has proposed \$100 million for land acquisition. The House bill would give the Farmland Trust \$8.5 million taken from the Tobacco Trust Fund, and there's talk of using the money for things other than than land acquisition and conservation easements. The Senate bill proposes nothing.

The competing needs of the university system and the prison system are legitimate. But before the lawmakers whittle the figure down to \$1 million, or to nothing at all, there are a few things that deserve attention.

The Farmland Preservation Trust has been around for two decades, but it got no substantial state funding before the millennium.

Since then, despite the state's having adopted a goal of saving a million acres over a decade, it has consistently been allocated sums far too small to move the program along. Each year something happens, but the process ends with more sound than substance.

With only a couple of years left, the state is less than halfway to the million-acre goal. More important, it is losing 100,000 acres of farm and forest to development each year. In 2005, it led the nation in such losses — a dubious distinction for a state trying to attract new business and industry.

Debt is not inherently evil. Few, if any, of the bills' critics could name a dozen successful businesses that have never done business with a bank. The issues here turn on two questions: (1) Is the \$1 billion really a budget-buster? and (2) How high a priority does conserving undeveloped land carry? Those are the things the lawmakers are there to decide.

If they are wise, they will make those decisions while keeping themselves reminded that failure to fund the trust means that many properties will not be there to protect in the next budget cycle. This is no time for lip service and false economy.

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