

Residents dig deep to preserve Cove Swamp

By Venita Jenkins

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Jonathan Cartrette, a Lake Waccamaw resident, enjoys an afternoon of fishing in the canal near Cove Swamp. Cartrette said it is important to preserve the swamp's natural beauty.

LAKE WACCAMAW — Residents here are digging into their pockets and knocking on doors to raise enough money to save a swamp from clearcutting.

So far, their efforts to preserve Cove Swamp and the water quality in Lake Waccamaw have paid off. Residents have raised \$34,000 — more than half the money needed to match a state grant.

Residents say they are concerned about the potential effect of clearcutting on the ecology and water.

The groups Friends of the Green Swamp and Friends of Lake Waccamaw State Park are spearheading the campaign to raise \$50,000 by May 1.

The state has committed \$650,000 through the Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the Parks and Recreation Fund. The Lake Waccamaw Board of Commissioners chipped in \$1,000.

Cove Swamps sits on the northern end of Lake Waccamaw. The swamp is 440 acres and crescent-shaped, between Canal Cove Drive and Wooded Acres Road. There are mostly cypress and black gum trees in the Cove Swamp.

Riverside Group, based in Virginia, had planned to clearcut last year. But public uproar prompted calls to public officials and led to the project being placed on hold.

Hervey McIver, land protection specialist with the Nature Conservancy, said the conservancy has been in discussions about purchasing the property for more than a year. The public outcry over the clearcutting restarted talks, he said.

"There were questions about how much the timber on the property was worth," he said.

The company agreed to sell the property for \$700,000. The land will be turned over to Lake Waccamaw State Park.

"It is important to the lake, and it is important to the water quality," McIver said. "It is the most biological diverse fresh water lake that has species unique to it."

Lonnie Fox, president of Friends of the Green Swamp, said once residents learned about the possibility of the property being clearcut, they started looking into what they could do to head it off. They learned that the Nature Conservancy had secured funding to purchase the land but needed the additional \$50,000. They kicked off a public campaign to raise the money on March 19. About 130 people attended and raised \$23,000 in one night.

"The two main concerns folks have focused on are what will be the environmental impact of the lake and what will be the aesthetic impact as far as how it would look and whether it would affect property values," said Fox, who lives on Canal Cove Road in front of the swamp.

"I certainly have a vested interest, but ever since we have been connected with the lake, we have heard people talk about how fragile this ecology is."

Jonathan Cartrette drifted along the canal in his boat while fishing Friday afternoon. He supports protecting the swamp.

"The clearcutting of the swamp is a concern of a lot of people here," Cartrette said. "People want it to stay like it has been for years. It has been this way since God made it."

Chris Helms, superintendent of Lake Waccamaw State Park, said the lake is unique. That makes the preservation of Cove Swamp important. The swamp is recognized as a significant natural area by the state, he added. The lake is home to many endemic species.

"As a representative of the park and the state, it is hard for us because we can not solicit funds or politick for funds," Helms said. "The state has made a good-faith offer, and I think the community involvement shows how the community feels about the lake and the need to protect it."

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potential impacts of clearcutting

The swamp's ability to absorb nutrients and filter contaminants could be greatly diminished.

The hydrology of the swamp could be changed, causing the soil to lose its ability to retain water.

Decomposing vegetation could flow down the canal into the lake, changing the oxygen levels and promoting growth of algae that could stifle other plants and animals.

The natural phosphorus content of the lake would be put out of balance, destroying species.

The bed of limestone beneath Lake Waccamaw makes the water neutral rather than acidic, which is unusual for Carolina bay lakes.

Sedimentation, which is always a problem in shallow bay lakes, could drastically increase.

Fecal coliform and other contaminants normally filtered by the swamp could increase to dangerous levels.

Loss of aesthetics and wildlife habitats — such as the American alligator, Waccamaw silverside fish and mussels only found in Lake Waccamaw.

Source: Diane Lauritsen, who holds a doctorate in marine biology, and the Lake Waccamaw State Park