

*Two years after its passage, the General Assembly is weighing funding for legislation designed to impact a broad range of the state's natural resources*

# CONSERVATION

**NO MORE DELAYS:**  
Bank should be funded now and given fair chance to work

By BRAD WYCHE  
For the Herald-Journal

In 2001 and 2002, business leaders, realtors, developers, conservationists and ordinary citizens from across South Carolina joined forces to support passage of the Conservation Bank Act. Several members of the General Assembly told me that in all their years of service, they had never seen a more



diverse group of people and organizations working together in favor of a particular bill.

The hard work paid off, and the legislation was signed into law in April 2002, but funding of the bank was deferred until this July. Yet, some opponents of the Conservation Bank will not give up. They are now rallying around a bill that would defer funding for yet another year.

That effort should be resoundingly

defeated. Two years of waiting is long enough. The bank should be allowed to open for business this summer, as promised.

The Conservation Bank provides a dedicated source of revenue to acquire, or protect through conservation easements, a broad range of resources in our state — environmentally sensitive areas, farmlands, forests, historic sites and so forth. The bank also can be used to acquire lands for



AP FILE PHOTOS

The Conservation Bank Act is intended to provide revenue to help acquire or protect state resources such as environmentally sensitive areas, farmlands, forests, hunting and fishing areas, greenways, historic sites, parks and other areas.

# BANK

**TIGHT BUDGET:** Economic issues, beach erosion result in the need to amend act

By RALPH DAVENPORT  
For the Herald-Journal

In the budget just passed by the House of Representatives, the membership voted on an amendment to direct the S.C. Conservation Bank to expend \$5 million for beach re-nourishment projects at Hunting Island State Park in Beaufort. An additional \$2.5 million was directed to the Department of Health and Human Services for Medicaid. The amendment to do both of these items passed the House by a vote of 75-35.

Opponents of the \$5 million for the beach re-nourishment project claim that this does not fall in line with the purpose of the S.C. Conservation Bank, however, section 48-59-20 of the 1976 Code of Laws states that "South Carolina is experiencing rapid land development and economic

growth, which has benefited the state's people and economy but has also led to the loss of forestlands, farmlands, wildlife habitats, outstanding natural areas, beaches and public areas for outdoor recreation; and has impacted the health of the state's streams, rivers, wetlands, estuaries and bays, all of which impacts the quality of life of the state's current and future citizens and may jeopardize the well-being of the state's environment and economy if not addressed appropriately."

In addition, the Web site of the Conservation Bank ([www.sccbak.sc.gov](http://www.sccbak.sc.gov)) states one of its objectives being "enhancing public access for outdoor recreation and preserving traditional uses such as hunting, fishing and



*"This has been a tough budget year. In tough budget years, tough decisions have to be made."*

RALPH DAVENPORT,  
S.C. House of Representatives

## Wyche

◆ *Now continued from A13* parks, hunting and fishing areas, greenways and open spaces for public use and enjoyment.

It is funded entirely by a small portion of the real estate transfer fee that is collected every time land is sold in the state. It is an eminently sensible source of funding that is widely used by many other states and localities in the country. No tax increase is involved, and all transactions are between willing sellers and buyers.

The law is a huge step in the right direction toward a better balance between **development** and conservation in our state. Although one of the smallest states, South Carolina currently ranks 10th in the country in the total amount of land that is being developed. To put that in perspective, our rate of development is the equivalent of three brand new WestGate Malls every day.

Of course, **we need growth** and development to provide jobs for our citizens and to keep our economy strong. But

for both environmental and economic reasons and to improve the quality of life for all of our citizens, we need more public parks, and we need to protect and preserve some of our state's important resources and special places.

The fact that tourism is now South Carolina's leading industry is due in large part to the beauty and quality of our natural resources. People come here (and many end up never leaving) because South Carolina is such a wonderful place. The Conservation Bank will help keep it that way.

The bank also can be used to protect South Carolina's working farms and forests, which today account for one out of every five jobs in our state. Total cash receipts for crops and livestock average \$1.5 billion every year, and South Carolina ranks near the top in the nation for several products, such as peaches and **tomatoes**. Timber is the number one product in 35 of South Carolina's 46 counties.

Many farmers and forest owners in our state are struggling to make ends meet but **do not** want to give up. The Con-

servation Bank could well mean the difference between the land staying in production or becoming a parking lot.

The bottom line is that the Conservation Bank will protect and improve both the environment and the economy of South Carolina.

Over the past 18 months, considerable effort has been devoted to ensuring that the bank will be ready for business when the funding begins in **July**. The members of the Conservation Bank board have been appointed, and with a generous grant from the Conservation Fund, a full-time executive director has been hired. A **Web** site has been established, and application forms for grants and loans from the bank have been prepared and are now available. Several applications already have been submitted. The Conservation Bank is

**projected to raise about \$10 million per year — far less than comparable conservation programs in other Southeastern states and communities (Florida: \$300 million per year; North Carolina: \$363 million from 1996 to date; Georgia: \$30 million per year; Raleigh, N.C.: \$47 million bond; DeKalb County, Ga.: \$125 million bond, to name just a few).**

Some members of the General Assembly continue to argue that in view of the state's budget difficulties, South Carolina "cannot afford" the Conservation Bank. Funding of the bank, however, amounts to less than 2/10ths of 1 percent of the state's budget. That is barely a blip on the budgetary radar screen.

**The same "we cannot afford it" argument was made and rejected in North Carolina relating to the Clean Water**

**Management Trust Fund, which provides funds to local governments, state agencies and conservation organizations for, among other things, protecting lands vital to water quality.** Since its establishment in 1996, the Clean Water Fund has awarded 453 grants totaling \$363 million and leveraged more than \$555 million in private and other public funds.

North Carolina's budget problems are just as difficult as ours. Yet, the North Carolina General Assembly recently approved \$62 million for the Clean Water Fund for 2003-04 and the same amount in 2004-05. North Carolina's total budget is about \$15 billion — nearly three times the budget of South Carolina. So that \$62 million is the equivalent of \$20 million here. The proposed level of funding for the Conservation Bank — about \$10 mil-

lion — is only half of that.

I urge all citizens to write their representatives in the General Assembly and ask them to stand firm and honor the commitment made in 2002 to launch the Conservation Bank in July of this year. Also please let Gov. Mark Sanford know that you appreciate the inclusion of \$10 million for the Conservation Bank in his proposed budget.

**Let's give the Conservation Bank a chance to work.**

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