

You've come a long way, Reedy

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Conservation groups hope fishing, watersports will return to river

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Deer tracks mark the sand. Birds perch in the trees, and water that once ran lime green has been restored to its natural muddy-brown color.

The Reedy River in southern Greenville County has come a long way in the eight years since a Colonial Oil pipeline spewed more than 950,000 gallons of diesel fuel into the water, killing 35,000 fish.

If all goes as some conservation groups plan, the public will one day use the hardest-hit 23-mile stretch to canoe, fish and even swim. But it won't be as easy as building a few new docks



PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

Hopes for Reedy River: Carol Jilley looks at a map where she would like to see a park on the Reedy River.

and boat ramps.

A few strings come with a \$3 million chunk of the settlement with Colonial

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Oil. The money has been set aside to either buy property from private landowners or purchase "conservation easements" that limit what they could build along the river.

But first the conservation groups, who are negotiating with landowners on behalf of the state, have to find an owner willing to sell property for appraised value. And some say there's a chance the Legislature could raid the fund before money is used to buy property.

The spill in June 1996 polluted 34 miles of the river, but the effort to conserve land is focusing on a 23-mile strip stretching from the pipeline near State 418

to Boyd Mill Pond. No land has been conserved so far.

Grant Cunningham, a Clemson University associate professor of planning and landscape architecture, said some landowners fear that curbing development with an easement would lower property values. But the easements offer tax write-offs and can increase property values by protecting river views, he said.

"The private individual may not reap immediate personal gain," he said. "But over the long term, you'll find there is gain."

Carol Gilley, who moved to Fork Shoals from Maryland 18 years ago, has focused on acquiring some mill property where Huff Creek's swishing rapids and the Reedy River converge about two miles downstream from the pipeline.

Weeds and tangled branches

fill the banks. The orange-brick Spinning Mill building has broken windows. But in Gilley's mind, the area could be alive with playing children, a band pavilion and a cafe.

"It would really open it up to a lot of recreation and family time," Gilley said of her vision.

The Legislature raided the Colonial Pipeline fund in 2002, using more than \$400,000 in interest to help make up for a state budget shortfall.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said federal law offers some protection for the fund, but he remains concerned the General Assembly could divert the money away from conservation.

"They've been raiding environmental funds for many years," he said. "Just look at their record."

Conservation groups, such as

Upstate Forever and Friends of the Reedy River, are negotiating with land owners, but they don't have the authority to spend the state's money. They can only make recommendations on which parcels to preserve.

Purchases would have to be approved by the state Department of Natural Resources board, the Joint Bond Review Committee and the state Budget and Control Board, said Barry Beasley, director of habitat protection for the state Department of Natural Resources.

It's the state's money, so no more than appraised value can be paid, Beasley said.

"Just like any other land purchase, there's the negotiation of price. It's just a matter of asking price and what can be paid," said Dan Trout, executive director of Friends of the Reedy River.

Boyce Clardy, who owns the 18.5-acre mill property, said he has never finalized a sale for his land, but he has talked with Gilley and negotiated with Wyche.

"It does have great potential for the park," Clardy said.

Landowners who put their property into a conservation easement would retain ownership. But Trout said development would be limited to low-impact structures, such as a dock or picnic shelter, within 200 feet of the water.

"We don't want them clear-cutting timber," he said.

Leaving undeveloped land on the sides of the river would help filter runoff, such as pesticides and herbicides, and lead to cleaner water, Trout said. A secondary benefit, he said, is that the open space would create a habitat for birds and other wildlife.

Mingteh Chang, forest hydrology professor at Stephen F. Austin State University, said the community should consider land slope, the size of soil particles and surface roughness when deciding how to limit development along rivers.

"A buffer strip of 200 feet wide should be sufficient in most streams in the Southeast," he said.

Wyche said the state and county don't provide enough money for new parks, so the pipeline settlement presents an unusual opportunity. Gilley's mill project could bring a new park to an area that now is filled with rolling green fields but is expected to grow, he said.

"It would be a wonderful resource today," Wyche said. "It would be even more appreciated as that area continues to develop and change."