

State lags behind in protecting vital land

Though expensive, conserving land gives public places for recreation

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Sightseers who enjoy the unspoiled mountain view from "Pretty Place" can rest easier now that state taxpayers have spent \$2 million to protect much of the land below, but other critical tracts might not be as safe.

South Carolina lags behind other states that have spent millions more to protect historic and pristine lands from the rapid influx of new homes and businesses.

State taxpayers recently paid \$11 million to conserve about 25,000 acres from the Upstate's mountains to the Lowcountry's marshes as the South Carolina Conservation Bank doled out its first round of grants.

"We're now in the game, but it took a long time for us to get there," said state Sen. John Matthews, a Columbia Democrat who supports the bank. "Our state tends to lag behind other states in a lot of progressive ideas."

Conserving land can be

expensive but often saves parcels from development so the public can use them to hunt, fish and hike. Other benefits include preserving space for wildlife and endangered plants.

Florida spent \$3 billion to conserve one million acres over a 10-year period that ended in 2000. Massachusetts has spent \$26 million a year on conservation, although the state is about a quarter the size of South Carolina, according to the State Environmental Resource Center.

South Carolina used its \$11 million to protect 12

PROTECTING LAND

Private developers usually work faster than the federal government, so conservation groups often step in to protect land. Here's how:

1. Conservation groups or the U.S. Forest Service identifies critical property.
2. Using private funds, a conservation group buys the land before developers can.
3. Once federal grants become available, the government buys the property from the conservation group at a slight markup.

Source: Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy

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parcels, including a 112-acre tract on Lake Conestee a foundation plans to turn into a park with hiking and bicycling trails. The state also used \$497,500 to extend the Jocassee Gorges preserve in Pickens County by 100 acres.

"Eleven million dollars in the real estate world isn't not a whole lot of money anymore," said Marvin Davant, the bank's executive director. "If you don't believe it, go up in the mountains and try to buy a piece."

Some of the most scenic land has become popular with retirees and homeowners looking for a vacation getaway, which has driven up prices.

Buzz Williams, executive director of the Chattooga Conservancy, said one Mountain Rest landowner wants \$4 million for 400 acres critical to northwestern Oconee County's wildlife.

At one time, U.S. Sen. Ernest Hollings could be counted on to use his spot on the appropriations committee to steer \$2 million a year to conserving land along the Chattooga River, Williams said. But the Democrat from Charleston declined to run for re-election.

"Those days are long gone," Williams said. "And we are desperate."

The South Carolina Conservation Bank expects to have about \$14 million a year to conserve land, Davant said. The money comes from a 25-cent chunk sliced off of a \$1.35 fee attached to documentary deed stamps.

Public and private conservation groups are racing to protect land as people move into the state at an increasing rate. The state's bank has estimated the population will rise 25 percent, or 1 million people, between 2000 and 2015.

As a result, the state will need 525,000 new housing units and 50 percent more paved roads, according to the bank.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said the bank was off to a great start, but South Carolina remains behind other states. He said the state needs more "local" banks to help the state bank.

"The state bank can't do it all by itself," Wyche said.

Six of the 18 parcels the state bank considered didn't receive a grant, including a farm in a fast-growing area about 10 miles

No building allowed

Land next to Lake Conestee, a view from northern Greenville County's "Pretty Place" and a Revolutionary War site were among the 12 parcels preserved by The South Carolina Conservation Bank for \$11 million, while six other sites failed to make the cut.



SOURCE: S.C. Governor's Office

Tract name	Size of tract	Amount requested	Deed type
1. Alewine	100	\$497,500	fee purchase
2. Baxley	979	\$794,000	easement
3. Cynthia Brown	51.33	\$135,000	easement
4. Jimmy Calder	56.5	\$71,500	fee purchase
5. Crescent	2,000	\$2 million	easement
6. Velma Johnson	34	\$179,000	easement
7. Cleveland	867	\$2 million	easement
8. Kyle Daniel	188.4	\$320,000	fee purchase
9. Marsh Furniture	9,347	\$2 million	easement
10. Ashley River Historic Project	3,093	\$2,285,000	fee purchase
11. City of Rock Hill	7,773	\$48,000	fee purchase
12. Camden Battleground	309.89	\$341,250	fee purchase
13. Tokeena Crossroads	1,100	\$5,384,626	easement
14. Henderson Farm	112	\$675,000	fee purchase
15. Morris Island Lighthouse	no land	\$50,000	
16. Waller Early	92.7	\$576,000	easement
17. Hickson (China Grove)	318	\$802,525	easement
18. Truitt Owens	86	\$290,550	easement

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southwest of Seneca, Davant said. All six could be considered again when the board meets in 2005, he said.

The farm outside Seneca and four other farms were deferred because they didn't qualify for federal matching grants, he said. A lighthouse on Morris Island was deferred to answer legal questions, Davant said.

Other states that have succeeded in conserving land have passed legislation that allows for public access, includes provisions for matching funds and has an objective panel review proposals, according to the State Environmental Resource Center, a Madison, Wis.-based group funded by the Turner Foundation until October.

Paying for the land through bonds has been popular, said Ju-

lian Zelazny, the center's director.

"The key is for opinion leaders in the state is to look at what's going on in the other states and try to adapt whatever is there to what fits South Carolina best," he said.

Wyche said he hopes the view from "Pretty Place" next to Jones Gap State Park will be further protected. He wants the bank to buy two additional tracts nearby in the next two years.

Matthews, a member of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, said, "Once they start preserving these tracks and this land and the general public begins to see it, I think there will be greater interest and greater support."

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