

## Conservation is still not a legislative priority

by Brad Wyche

The e-mail from a lobbyist in Columbia was captioned "Unbelievable News!" and reported that the state budget included \$2 million in funding for the South Carolina Conservation Bank, a highly successful and effective program for protecting important lands, natural resources, and historic sites in our state. This was considered a legislative miracle since only a couple of weeks earlier, our best hope was for only \$200,000 to keep the program on life support.

Why didn't I feel jubilant about the news? Instead, I shook my head in dismay. I didn't feel like celebrating.

I want to make clear that my feelings have nothing to do with the lobbyists who work on conservation issues in Columbia. They're the best in the business and advocate valiantly for the passage of critically important legislation despite staggering odds—on some issues lobbyists on the other side outnumber them by 10 to 1. They assured us—and I agree—that \$2 million is a phenomenal achievement.

My problem is with the political reality that conservation is not, and never has been, a true legislative priority in South Carolina. And yet no state is more beautiful than ours, and no state's economy is more dependent on its natural resources than ours. Compelling proof of this fact is found in "Green Means Green," a study just released by USC's Moore School of Business, which documents that natural resources (not including agriculture) provide \$30 billion in economic benefits to our state each year and support 236,000 jobs. Clearly, conservation is inextricably linked to our state's economic well-being.

To the General Assembly's credit, it did enact the Conservation Bank Act in 2002. The Bank is funded by a portion of the state's share of the deed recording fee, which is collected every time real estate is sold in South Carolina.

But from the very beginning you could see that the majority of the legislators really didn't have their hearts in it. First, they delayed starting the program for two years. Second, they allocated only a small portion of the deed recording fee (about 20%) to the Bank. Even in good economic times, the Bank received only \$15 million to \$18 million per year—less than one-third of one percent of the state budget—compared with hundreds of millions of dollars allocated for conservation in our neighboring states. Third, they included a



"death penalty" clause stating that whenever half or more of other state agency budgets were cut, the Conservation Bank would be "zeroed out" and receive no funding. And finally, the program was approved for only a short period of time—the Bank will "sunset" in 2013 unless the General Assembly extends it.

Despite these serious limitations, in just four years, the Bank has been able to protect 152,000 acres of significant lands in South Carolina at an average cost of only \$528 per acre. In the Upstate, the projects include Stumphouse Mountain in Oconee County, the Nine Times tract in Pickens County, and the Lake Conestee Nature Park in Greenville County. None of these great projects—and many, many others across South Carolina—would have happened without the Conservation Bank. You would hope that with this extraordinary track record, the General Assembly's attitude would have changed from lukewarm skepticism to enthusiastic support. But as soon as the economic crisis struck, the Conservation Bank was on the chopping block.

During the special legislative session in October, a proposal was made to transfer all remaining funds in the Conservation Bank to the Department of Education. Several members of the House and Senate, who have been strong and long-time advocates for the Conservation Bank, strenuously objected, but to no avail. It was a shocking decision because at its meeting in June of last year, the Conservation Bank Board had committed these funds to the protection of 24 important properties throughout the state and the owners of many of these properties had incurred substantial expenses and made irreversible plans based on the state's commitment. It got even worse: when the regular legislative session began in January, budget writers invoked the death penalty clause and provided no funding for the Conservation Bank this year, leading to the desperate plea for \$200,000 to at least keep the lights on.

While the \$2 million in funding will be put to good use by the Bank, it doesn't even scratch the surface of meeting the conservation needs of our state. How do we make conservation a true priority in the General Assembly? It's up to us. The members of the legislature represent us in Columbia so we need to express our strong support for the Conservation Bank, for funding it at higher levels, and for removing the death penalty and sunset provisions. Please call your representatives today. ☞

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