



# Times-News

## PROTECTING OUR MOUNTAINS STARTS WITH OUR SLOPES

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ECO NOTES



It's a bloody mess and it happens every year. Scratched and bruised arms and legs. Muddied clothes. And occasionally the lacerated cornea. Although not traditionally a war zone, a raspberry and blackberry patch can appear like one to the uninitiated. My berry canes work hard to outsmart me every year, and with this year being a bumper crop, the bloodletting was pervasive. But the spoils of war, buckets of bright red and purplish bounty were tempered by the gauze pads and band-aids, the casualties of war. It's a painful treasure, but worth it all the same.

Nature seems to find a way of protecting its most important treasures from the incursions of man. Waterways are naturally protected by buffers of trees and other plant life which helps to filter out toxins during rains, holds banks firm against erosion and shades waterways helping aquatic bugs and the fish who eat them to proliferate.

Ridgetops and steep slopes tend to have magnificent views of our Blue Ridge Mountains. But they tend to be poor places to build. Their typically thin soils and lack of water resources make them mudslide hazards for homeowners and water quality disasters for those dependent on clean water below. Sustainable groundwater is typically unavailable on steep slopes and steep slope development can have a major effect on stream health by damaging stream buffers, causing substantial stormwater runoff and sedimentation and erosion.

ECO's Green Infrastructure Committee has been studying how to better protect land uses in Henderson County over the past year by reviewing successful rules in the region that protect our mountains. There are very few counties within 100 miles of here that do not have steep slopes rules in place. Buncombe, Haywood and Jackson County all have ordinances regulating development on steep slopes and Polk County and Lake Lure have recently passed their own rules as well. Henderson County is the only county that restricts steep slope construction starting at 60% slopes, an acknowledgement that even Hooterville is not exempt from the law of gravity.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, much of WNC is at high risk for landslides. They have detailed over 2000 historic slope failures in the region since records were kept. As a result of the potential liability, all insurance policies in WNC explicitly deny coverage for damage or destruction caused by landslides. North Carolina has begun work on a project to map landslide-prone areas throughout the mountains. Several counties have already been mapped by the NC Geological Survey. State Representative Ray Rapp has attempted every year since 2007 to establish mandatory requirements for counties in the mountains.

As recently as January, dangerous life-threatening mudslides have occurred in WNC. In January, a 300 foot mudslide cascaded down a hill in Maggie Valley, destroying the home below narrowly averting the death of the residents.

What should be done?

- Potential home buyers should be told when a house is in an area mapped by the NC Geological Survey as at risk for landslide hazards. By requiring disclosure, buyers are fully informed and home builders may have less incentive to build in places they shouldn't. Additionally, existing

homeowners are empowered to take action by building storm drains, retaining walls and other structures that stabilize slopes.

- Builders should be required to conduct site-specific analysis that assesses geology, soil type, construction techniques and the intensity of development and minimum standards needed to ensure that construction employs best practices. Developers building in landslide hazard areas and on the steepest slopes must consult with a qualified engineering professional before proceeding.
- Requirements are needed to ensure that construction on the steepest slopes and in known hazard areas minimizes removal of trees and replants trees wherever possible. Trees are critically important to slope stability, as their roots stabilize soft soil and remove moisture that contributes to slope instability.
- The county needs a stronger ordinance to protect against the public health and safety consequences of building on steep slopes that includes all of the above.

A great opportunity is available this month for county commissioners to take action by approving the Etowah-Horseshoe Plan that includes steep slopes restrictions. Nature offers WNCers breathtaking views that are unparalleled. Steep slopes and ridgetops are wonderful places to hike on existing trails and in parks. Let's not muddy the waters by building on them more than is safe.

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