

Our Vanishing Countryside

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From green to gray. That's the gist of a recent report by the newly established *Land and Water Conservation Study Commission* concerning North Carolina's green spaces. According to the report, *Losing Our Natural Heritage*, in the last twenty years North Carolina has lost nearly 2.4 million acres of cropland and forestland. That's equal to 325 acres disappearing every day. Where have all the open spaces gone? Not surprisingly, development. In two decades, development land area in the state has increased by 1.86 million acres, a 65% increase.

Rural counties in Western North Carolina saw developed land increase by 588,000 acres, a 54% increase. On the farmland front, the news is not any more heartening. According to United States Department of Agriculture reports, North Carolina led the nation in 2006, losing 1,000 farms. Closer to home in Henderson County, we lost 14,721 acres of farmland between 1987 and 1997, something obvious to anyone driving our byways. Assuming this trend continues, our county will lose an additional 23,000 acres by 2017. The latest from the Henderson County Planning Department is that from 1993 to 2003 open space declined by more than 50,000 acres or approximately 22%.

I have friends that moved into a large development not long ago. I visited them just before the landscaping had been installed. I was stunned to see that all of the houses fronted a rectangular pond. It may not have been so striking had the look-alike homes not resembled a tract of mausoleums. To call them cookie cutter would have given tollhouse a bad name. These homes could have been situated in a shopping mall or a landfill, instead they were placed in what used to be countryside. The development was *on* the land, but it was not *of* the land. Its not unreasonable to assume that our county will be one stretch of these gray clusters if no controls on growth are employed.

When the question turns to how to protect our vanishing countryside, we are forced in a difficult position—give up land rights and gain some protection or hold onto our rights and kiss our county goodbye. The second worst thing we can do is to tighten up our zoning code because landowners lose some control on what they can do with their land and many folks have a natural suspicion of government regulations. Other folks say the answer is 'just don't sell your land' to greedy developers. If only it was that easy. It's simple for investors to wait out current landowners, chipping away until the last holdouts have nothing left but a few trees between themselves and mega-suburban sprawl.

However, the WORST thing we can do is to leave land-use planning decisions to the highest bidder. That's what we're doing now, running an extremely desirable county with zoning that's more full of holes than a dead poplar after a pileated woodpecker has had breakfast. It's the golden rule, our green spaces turn into gold (for some) while leaving us with sterile manicured cement canyons.

That's not to say that growth is a bad thing. Pedestrian friendly neighborhoods that are close to municipal services and are of equivalent density to what is currently around them help to foster communities. The dismantling of green spaces to give a few well heeled folks a good view while destroying scenic vistas, damaging waterways and draining county services simply does not. Developers don't pick up the tab when the county needs to build more roads, schools, water systems and firehouses. We do.

Carl Sandburg's Big Glassy Mountain is close to my home. I seek Carl's spirit atop the mountain as often as I can. I love to look down and be reminded that I still live in the country. I watch the world, bright and green in spring and summer, crimson and yellow in fall and gray in winter. I gaze at evergreens, the sentinels of the frigid world, who remind me when all else is bare, that life still continues beneath the frozen ground. And I'm excited when the vernal equinox comes once more, ushering with it the promise of a new parade of green.

It's not too late to protect and preserve our mountains. The new Land Development Code is not the answer. Not by itself. It's only a first step in the right direction. After that, it's up to us, those who live here and care about this place to make sure our government leaders not only live up to the LDC's standards, but rise to the challenge to protect our steep slopes, our sensitive floodplains and our other natural habitats. It's also up to us to bring our children back into the woods to experience what we did growing up. They won't understand the precious heirloom they have, if they don't have it coursing through their veins. And, finally it's up to us to be vigilant to insure that this runaway train of unchecked development be returned to the station for a major tune-up, guided by citizens' desires, rather than by those with gold-colored glasses stalking our open spaces.

Editor's Note: ECO Notes is provided by the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a nonprofit organization dedicated to clean air, clean water, recreation, and the conservation and preservation of the natural heritage and resources of the mountain region. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or on-line at www.eco-wnc.org.