



# Times-News

## You can make an investment in our mountains

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ECO NOTES

How much is our rural mountain economy worth? Can we put a price on the riches of clean streams, creeks and rivers? What is it worth to live in a place surrounded by the majestic Southern Appalachian Mountains? Can working farmland in our own backyard be measured in dollars and cents, both in terms of the produce harvested and the "feeling" we get walking/cycling/driving past them?

In a word, yes! The value of our mountain heritage, from our Appalachian music and traditional agriculture to our wealth of waterways, are all lifelines integrally connected to the state of our economy and its future. Several recent studies demonstrate that maintaining our green open spaces make green sense.

A 2004 study on tourism, related to the North Carolina section of the Blue Ridge Parkway, demonstrated that visitors brought in \$6 billion annually because of the breathtaking viewscapes that the Parkway offered. According to the study, which included surveys of Parkway visitors, the researchers concluded that 25 percent of these visitors would not return if the Parkway continued to decline as a result of lack of maintenance and increasing development, at a loss of \$2 to \$4 billion. However, if the scenic quality was maintained, tourism would increase to \$11 to \$15 billion annually. Given that tourism brings in nearly \$200 million to Henderson County, these figures should shed some light on the value of protecting our community's rural character.

What about the financial benefits generated by large developments? Mitch Renkow, a development economist at the Agricultural and Resource Economics Department at North Carolina State University, has studied several North Carolina counties in the last three years. His research, which will soon include our county, looked at whether property taxes and other revenues generated by residential land uses exceeded the amount of publicly-provided services supplied to them. The same comparison was done for other uses such as farmland, forest land and commercial property.

In every county studied, the results were the same. The residential sector contributes only 65-87 cents to county coffers for each dollar's worth of services received. In fact, commercial and agricultural uses far exceeded residential use. Commercial and industrial land uses contribute \$3.01 to \$4.29 in revenues for each dollar of publicly provided services received, while agricultural land generated \$1.38 to \$1.69 in revenues for every dollar of public services.

Clearly, the value of public services provided to residential land uses (public water, sewer, schools, and human services) exceeded the property taxes and other revenues that they contribute to the county budget. This flies in the face of conventional "wisdom" that residential development is a boon to the local economy by pumping up the property tax base. According to Renkow, agricultural lands more than pay their own way. Interestingly enough, agriculture's net contribution to local fiscal resources (relative to the services that are provided to it) has increased substantially.

Interestingly enough, this was also true in so-called retirement areas where a large part of the population was seasonal. In a recent study of Macon County, where a large segment of the population lived there only half the year, the cost in community services outweighed the taxes brought in. The same study showed that the community could maintain its current tax rates, or minimize tax increases, by maintaining land as open space rather than promoting development. This is not to say that development on some level has no benefits to a community, but plainly it doesn't add as much to the tax base as some may think.

Investing in the protection of our mountains does have a return, both from its effect on our county's revenues as well as how it makes us feel, such as the serenity of wandering down our country roads. These benefits include living in a place where trout proliferate, hiking trails are literally just outside our front steps and local fruits, vegetables, eggs and milk abound.

For 20 years, ECO has been a voice of our region's environment, long before being green was fashionable. We have been involved in every major effort to preserve our region from water quality protection to education, from advocacy on land use planning issues to monthly hikes. Due to the challenges presented by unprecedented growth and relatively weak land regulations, ECO has rededicated itself to becoming an even stronger voice for the environment.

Good investments are based on the expectation of good returns. ECO is in the process of unveiling a five year plan that includes promoting more stringent land use planning, working toward county-wide recycling, promoting greater water quality protection, and emphasizing renewable energy and energy conservation.

To be successful, we need the help of the community. With your support we can undertake this revitalized approach to protect our mountains. Our new Mountaintop Fund Campaign was launched so the organization can reach the next level. Help us lead the way in promoting our community's rural character, protecting our waterways, steep slopes and ridge tops, leaving a lasting legacy in our natural heritage. Please consider making a contribution this holiday season to ECO.

Our goal is to raise \$100,000 by year's end to pay for our new programs and a larger staff. For more information about the Mountaintop Fund Campaign, please log on to our Web site: [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org), call us at 692-0385, or send your tax deductible donations to ECO, 121 Third Ave. W., Suite 4, Hendersonville, N.C., 28792. Thank you.



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