



## Mountain Landscapes Initiative program to balance growth with conservation across WNC

By Jessica Richardson  
Staff writer

The Mountain Landscapes Initiative has begun a community-based, regional approach to managing growth in the mountains of western North Carolina. The Southwestern Commission council of governments has launched the program for the state's seven westernmost counties in conjunction with The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina (CF).

"We can't leave the future of our mountain region to chance," said Pat Smith, CF president. "We must be intentional in determining how we want the communities and landscapes we pass on to next generations to look and feel."

For the last couple of years, CF has been researching the needs in its 18 county area and determining issues connected with planning and land use are among the most pressing.

A growth management workshop was held in June 2007 that brought 50 WNC leaders and staff experts to a meeting to address regional concerns about growth in the mountains. More than 62 percent responded to a questionnaire about concerns. Among primary concerns were development on unstable slopes and protection of rivers and streams. However, "dealing with a combination of concerns while nurturing a strong local and regional economy" drew the most support.

Mountain Landscapes Initiative grew out of the interest in creating

a regional approach to concerns.

Within six months, the Mountain Landscapes Initiative hopes to host a regional charrette to produce the content for a "Tool Box" for regional builders that addresses the best practices for planning and building in the region while not compromising values of preserving the area's natural draw—the mountains. The toolbox should become available within a year and facilitated workshops will be held for those in the field such as property owners, contractors, developers, planners and real estate agents. "From the start, this has been an inclusive process," said Bob Wagner, vice president of CF programs. "People must see their ideas, values, concerns and hopes reflected in the end product. That is why we are creating a transparent process that engages people from all perspectives — whether they are farmers, developers, long-time landowners, newcomers, property rights or zoning advocates."

A donation of \$100,000 in seed money from The Community Foundation of WNC has gotten the program up and running. The Southwestern Commission has opened requests nationally for experts to participate in a weeklong session this summer to develop the toolbox.

According to the request for proposals for the charrette this summer, the toolbox could include things like a how-to guide of comprehensive approaches to development that also preserve

farmland, protect environmental assets and allow for appropriate density in a diverse range of human habitat. Other ideas include guides to siting and building with watershed protection in mind, transportation and transit planning and an introduction to tried-and-true architectural approaches in the region leading to a future Pattern Book of region-appropriate architecture.

"This is an exciting opportunity," said Vicki Greene, director of planning and development services of the Southwestern Commission and project manager. "I feel as if we have been preparing for this for years. Finally, the time is right."

Greene appeared at a previous Macon County Commission meeting and a recent Franklin Board of Aldermen meeting to request funding towards the initiative. The county was the first in the region to give and donated \$10,000. Other donations have been sought from local businesses.

Greene also approached the town with an idea to use the Whitmire Property purchased by the town several years ago as a possible site for a mixed-use neighborhood. Mayor Joe Collins supported the idea, but the idea seemed not to impress other board members who tabled the discussion.

Managing growth has certainly gained more headway in the region as of late. In Macon County, the planning board has a subdivision ordinance that is being reviewed by the county attorney prior to being presented to the

board of commissioners. Jackson County last year voted several new members to their board of commissioners who have dedicated themselves to the subject. The county passed both a subdivision ordinance and a steep slope development ordinance last year, after a controversial moratorium on new subdivisions.

An advisory committee of local leaders will participate in the Mountain Landscapes Initiative in every step and continued discussions will take place among policy makers and citizens to address regulations that best shape the region. Planners and policy-makers will have access to improved data inventories for educated decisions. Maps of land use trend data and scenario planning should also provide additional information for what growth could look like. Data will be archived on a website as well.

"There might have been a time not so long ago when land use planning was too controversial in our region to be on the top of election officials' agendas," said Bill Gibson, executive director of Southwestern Commission. "But there's been a change. In fact, I think the politics has just about flipped on this issue. Now, current and former officials are calling and asking for help planning for growth. There could not be a better time for this initiative. And there could not be anything more important, so we're proud to lead the effort in the seven westernmost counties."

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