

Lake preservation —

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Resources, the Charlotte-based subsidiary of Duke Energy that owns most of the land around the lake, and local and state officials. In any case, land will have to be purchased, since Crescent is unwilling to donate property.

Because negotiations are still in the early stages, officials wouldn't say how many acres are being discussed or what the potential cost might be.

State officials seem especially enthusiastic about the concept of expanding the state park, among the smallest in the park system, and are working now to determine which areas along the shoreline would be best suited for acquisition.

According to Carol Tingley, chief of planning and natural resources for the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, the existing 580-acre park is too small.

"It's just not adequate to provide the facilities for the number of people who want to come to the park," Tingley said. "It has a very small campground and limited swimming. We definitely are interested in expanding the park."

The Division of Parks and Recreation will likely play a lead role in raising funds for the purchase of land. One thing is certain, the project is going to cost big bucks.

"It's going to be expensive, and it's going to take some time to put the money together," Tingley said. But she noted that public support for land preservation would greatly aid the effort.

"We're real happy to have the public's interest. I think that will definitely make a difference in raising the money for the project."

Raising the necessary funds will be the biggest challenge. Funding could come from a number of public and private sources, but most likely the state would be a big contributor.

Local conservation leaders, however, offer a word of caution.

"Right now in North Carolina there is tremendous competition for money like this," said Susie Hamrick Jones, executive director of the Foothills Conservancy.

Jones has considerable experience in the complex process of financing purchases of private land for public use. Her group played a key role in raising \$13 million to purchase and preserve the Rollins Tract in the South Mountains earlier this year.

Crescent officials say they are willing to sell land at the lake to the state or a consortium of conservation groups, but no discounts will

be offered.

"If the proper funding were to come along, yes, we would be willing to sell the land," said Crescent Vice President Steve Shriner, who's in charge of residential development on Crescent land on all the lakes in the Duke system. "But it has to be a realistic purchaser. We're going to sell it at market price."

More than anyone else, Braun has been the leader and motivator in the fight to protect the Lake James shoreline. It was Braun's group that brought the issue to the public eye and, over the course of several months, built a powerful grass-roots movement.

Since its organization last November, Citizens To Save Lake James has garnered the signatures of more than 5,000 residents of Burke and McDowell counties calling for the protection of land at Lake James.

The group has gained endorsements from county commissioners and from conservation groups like the Morganton-based Foothills Conservancy, the N.C. Clean Water Trust Fund and the Lake James Environmental Association.

"None of these groups are against development and industry, but they are interested in a balance," said Ruby Pharr, chairman of the Foothills Conservancy's board of directors.

Also supporting Braun's group are sportsmen's clubs, including the local Trout Unlimited and Bassmasters chapters.

"With more population, you need some green areas," said Sam Erwin, president of the Table Rock chapter of Trout Unlimited. "The concerns are definitely valid. We support any effort to purchase land for conservation purposes to give the public more opportunities.

Obviously if it's all sold to private concerns, the general public would have less opportunity."

Braun said he became motivated to do something after noticing surveying flags and other signs of an outing on the lake last year.

"It all happened so fast, the community didn't have time to respond," said Braun, a Morganton electrician who has enjoyed many fishing and camping outings on the lake. "I just decided I was going to do something whether I became the laughingstock of the town or not."

The exclusive South Pointe development, located on the Burke side of the lake, will initially have 260 homes, but the number could grow to as high as 800 in future years, Crescent officials say.

South Pointe galvanized conservationists and struck a chord with many ordinary citizens, who say the huge subdivision will forever alter the scenic appeal of the lake and diminish water quality.

"This is the top water impoundment for the whole Catawba River basin," Braun said. "The only hope to clean up the lower lakes is in the last largely undeveloped lake in North Carolina. There are very few waterways left that aren't developed and polluted. If Crescent is not stopped, all of Lake James will be developed. It will be ruined like everything else they've had anything to do with."

Opponents of unchecked growth worry that South Pointe is only the beginning of a massive wave of new development that could turn Lake James into "another Lake Norman."

"We'd like to see more land in the public trust and remain in an undeveloped state," noted Denton Emery, president of the Lake James Environmental Association. "You can still see bald eagles, and we've even seen a golden eagle. There's all kinds of wildlife, but with too much development it will be gone."

He added, "It's ironic that we don't try to do anything until we already have a problem. Here, we don't have a problem, but we're fast creating one."

Some local real estate agents are even taken aback by the pace of lake development, though they stand to gain financially from growth.

"Crescent has been a good steward of the land, but it's also a business to them and they have to pay taxes on raw land," said Ronnie Thompson, president of the Burke County Board of Realtors and a former county commissioner. "We need a wilderness area left at the lake. It's impossible to clean up a lake once it's polluted and over-crowded."

He added, "I have no problem with Crescent making money or Jim Belote making money. To Crescent it's an economic issue, but to the people who live in Burke County it ought to be more than an economic issue."

Though no timetable has been set, Braun said he's optimistic that involvement at the state level will help produce the necessary funds to make a land purchase possible.

"We have very good support at the state level," he said. "Water quality is in trouble and everyone knows it. I honestly believe the people at the state level are concerned about this."

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