

Lake James State Park, the two plans

BY JOSHUA HARRIS
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MORGANTON — Efforts by all parties involved to sit down, voice their concerns and find a solution to the problem saved Lake James.

Everyone involved had talked about a state park expansion at the lake, but no one involved was sure the state would sign off on the deal to buy the lands.

In order to move forward and settle the lawsuit, Crescent Resources and the Burke County Board of Commissioners came up with two plans for the property at Lake James: one with a state park and one without.

County Board Chairman Tom Johnson, with the help and cooperation of all parties involved, put together a team of negotiators to settle the lawsuit and create a comprehensive plan for Lake James.

Johnson brought together Art Fields, CEO Crescent Resources; Eric Jenkins, conservationist; Mike Fulenwider, private business leaders; Dan Kuehnert, county attorney; Jim Mozley, a senior vice president of Crescent Resource; Clark Erwin and Dr. Gresham Orrison, business leaders; Trip VanNoppen, environmental attorney, and Susie Jones, executive director of Foothills Conservancy, to find a solution that would benefit everyone.

Crescent, conservationists, the county, businessmen, economic development, the public were all represented and the negotiations started.

The negotiators discussed what was important to their various groups.

"They started talking about setting aside a piece of land for a state park," Johnson said. The Citizens to Save Lake James was asked to present its vision of the lake to the group and that presentation truly helped shape the direction the negotiators took, he said.

"(But) it was very difficult to hold the coalition together," Johnson said. Throughout the negotiations, Johnson and the coalition stuck to their guns and represented their respective communities

el of Lake James, Crescent and the county agreed to development ordinances that, in most instances, were stricter than the original ordinances that were in dispute. The "Lake James Comprehensive Development Public Access and Preservation Plan" protected the lake water, provided public access, protected the scenic view, protected the shoreline, protected wildlife, limited night lighting and provided many other provisions and protections for the lake.

Even after the county and Crescent agreed on the ordinances, everyone involved still had a state park in the back of their minds.

"We made three trips to Raleigh," Johnson said. There, the team presented the vision of an expanded state park to House leadership first and got them to buy in and commit funding, he said.

"We went back a week and a half later and sat down with Senate leadership," Johnson said. "We told them what we wanted to do, and they bought into it as well."

Mozley said, "The state was incredible to work with. They were excited that we were serious about making the jewel of Lake James available."

Johnson, Mozley and the negotiators then had to turn the fate of an extended state park over to Raleigh and local representatives including Walter Church, D-Burke, and Mitch Gillespie, R-McDowell, who followed through and got the money for an expanded state park at Lake James.

Gov. Mike Easley putting his signature on the \$18 million land deal Thursday was the culmination of eight years of work by Paul Braun and the Citizens to Save Lake James, Susie Hamrick Jones and the Foothills Conservancy, and the later efforts of Art Fields, the Burke County Commissioners and the Lake James Task Force.

"I'm truly grateful for what they've done," Braun said. "For working with the state and the conservationists to preserve this land for the good of the public."

