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Nature lovers worry about Chimney Rock [NC]

[Charlotte Observer](#) | August 13, 2006 | Greg Lacour

Posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 9:33:35 AM by [southernnorthcarolina](#)

CHIMNEY ROCK - In late July, a few days after the owners of one of North Carolina's most popular scenic attractions announced they were selling it, Jim Proctor started his Web site, [savechimneyrock.net](#).

Since then, e-mails, calls and letters have poured in, some from as far away as California, from people who have visited and love the park. Their message, Proctor said, matches his own: Chimney Rock Park needs to be preserved by making it part of the N.C. state park system, not compromised or ruined through development.

The park's owners, the Morse family, have already turned down one state offer. But the Morses and state officials said Friday they continue to negotiate a price.

Meanwhile, Proctor updates his site and encourages people to write the family, urging them to meet the state halfway.

"It's amazing how many people are interested," said Proctor, a 49-year-old Realtor and mayor of the nearby town of Lake Lure. "I was not surprised at all that this issue has ignited people in the (area) more than any issue I've ever seen in my life, and I've lived here all my life.

"But what took me aback is that it's a regional issue, if not a national issue."

He and the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, which has also fielded several dozen calls and e-mails, stress that most comments are coming from the area around the 996-acre park, in Rutherford County about 100 miles west of Charlotte.

The park, owned since 1902 by the Morse family, encompasses hundreds of plant and wildlife species, six hiking trails, a 404-foot waterfall and rocky outcroppings -- especially Chimney Rock itself, a 315-foot monolith -- overlooking Lake Lure and Hickory Nut Gorge. On a clear day, visitors can see 75 miles. The park draws about 200,000 visitors per year, sometimes more.

Plans for a new state park

Parks and Recreation is reserving land in the area for its planned Hickory Nut Gorge State Park, which the state hopes to open by 2010. It wants the Chimney Rock property, which sits on the southern side of the gorge, in the heart of what would be the state park. "Its scenic value, its recreational value, is obvious," said Parks and Recreation spokesman Charlie Peek. "But you have this natural heritage value that lifts it to another level."

Before the Morses decided to sell, though, they turned down a \$20 million offer from the state. On July 18, they listed the property at \$55 million -- the largest asking price for a piece of private property in the state's history.

Both the Morses and state officials say they continue to negotiate and want to find a way to preserve Chimney Rock's natural beauty. That's what Proctor said his campaign is all about: impressing on the parties involved how important the park is, and urging them to stay put at the bargaining table.

"I don't want to beat the drum over and over again," he said, "but the state really needs to buy that property."

The Morses want to see the land preserved, too, said Todd Morse, the park's president, general manager and co-owner with his father, Lucius Morse III. But they also want to make sure they're compensated for a unique and valuable piece of property, he said.

One of the reasons the family decided to sell, Morse said Friday, is that the local real estate market "is going crazy," and the family decided it'd be best financially to sell. But they don't want, say, condominiums dotting the mountainside, he said.

"This is not something we took lightly," he said. "It's not like we're saying, 'Well, we're going to cash in our chips and go to Vegas.' I take the stewardship of this mountain very seriously."

What's the land worth?

But neither Morse nor Mark Evans, a Realtor for Cape Fear Sotheby's International Realty and the property's listing agent, would discuss potential buyers besides the state. Both said they continue to negotiate in good faith with the state.

Peek said the state hopes it can return to the table at some point with a stronger proposal, possibly enlisting the help of area conservation groups that already own some nearby land. Peek declined to say what kind of help the groups might offer.

But the state's options are limited in negotiations. Under the N.C. Constitution, the state can't offer more than fair market value for any piece of property it wants to buy. A state appraisal last year set Chimney Rock Park's value at \$20 million, the amount the state offered the Morses this year.

Jill Lucas, spokeswoman for the N.C. Department of Administration, declined to discuss the details of the appraisals. But Evans said the Morses are asking for \$55 million because the appraisal failed to take into account the land's unique properties as a scenic and natural landmark.

"What someone is willing to pay for the property, that's what the true appraisal is," Evans said. "It's not our desire to find a buyer who will completely overdevelop the property."

Of course, that leaves a lot of room for interpretation, which is what Proctor and the people who write and call him worry about.

One of those is Barbara Drummond, a 61-year-old resident of suburban Boston who travels to Chimney Rock nearly every year to watch birds.

She said the nature trails aren't too strenuous for her and offer spectacular views of the area and wildlife.

If the property were developed, she said, "I'd be very upset. I'm against development anyway. So many of our forests are being ripped apart, and I'd hate to see it happen in North Carolina, because there's a lot of contiguous forest left there.

"I just think that area is special."

About Chimney Rock Park

• The Morse family has owned the park since 1902. Dr. Lucius Morse, the great-great-uncle of current co-owner and park president Todd Morse, was a Chicago physician suffering from tuberculosis around the turn of that century. He moved to Western North Carolina for the fresh air and found he loved the area. So he bought the 64-acre parcel surrounding the namesake rock and began maintaining it as a nature preserve. Over the years, the Morses kept adding more land to the park.

- The 1992 movie "The Last of the Mohicans," starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Madeleine Stowe, was filmed at the park.
- The rock and mountainsides around it are made of gneiss, a type of rock formed over millions of years from igneous granite.

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KEYWORDS: [environment](#); [landgrab](#); [propertyrights](#)

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The assault on private property continues.

Typical of the *Observer* to begin the article not with a quote from the family which has owned the land, and has paid taxes on it for more than a century, but rather from a yahoo with a website and no legal standing in the matter whatever. This do-gooder, intent on costing the property owner millions, doesn't want the property "ruined through development." No bias there. Development always "ruins" property, right?

I'm worried about Chimney Rock, too. I'm worried that it will fall out of private ownership and off the tax rolls, and be added to the vast government-controlled acreage in western North Carolina. I'd recommend that anyone interested look at a *detailed* map (a road atlas won't do) of North Carolina showing the boundaries of national, state, and local parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and Indian Reservations. The total amount of land under government ownership or effective government control is stunning.

The busybody with the website "encourages people to write the [property-owning] family, urging them to meet the state halfway." In this case, "halfway" evidently means \$37.5 million, or halfway between the states offer of \$20 million and the public offering price of \$55 million. And frankly, the owners might be well advised to do just that; I have little doubt that the state will simply condemn the property before they allow it to be sold to another private owner.

This "fair and balanced" article concludes with a quote from another person with no legal standing on the matter, the utterly clueless Barbara Drummond of Massachusetts who goes to Chimney Rock to watch birds. If the property were developed, Ms. Drummond says, "I'd be very upset. *I'm against development anyway.*" So, there you have it. Ownership by the State, good. Ownership by individuals, bad. And *development*, horror of horrors, evil.

1 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 9:33:35 AM by [southernnorthcarolina](#)

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I'll keep an eye on the situation to see how it develops.

Funny how the state and bird hunters go on and on about how important the land is and then boil it down to This is all we'll offer for the land, based on state law.

As the seller the owners have the right to list the property for what they think it is worth, sit on all offers and consider them. To the state "Deal with them, agree to their price or STFU."

2 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 9:42:15 AM by [PeteB570](#) (Guns, what real men want for Christmas)

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Having visited this extraordinarily beautiful park, I'd like to see it remain as it is too, but I don't see why that can't be done under private ownership. Surely it must be turning some sort of profit with 200,000 visitors per year.

3 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 9:42:43 AM by [Aetius](#)

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To: [PeteB570](#)

The state of NC seized land in WNC a few years ago slated for development after they offered less than the other bidders. They will no doubt do the same here. Private property and the right of the owner to dispose of it as he wishes are at the whim of the state.

4 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 9:55:47 AM by [saganite](#) (Billions and billions and billions-----and that's just the NASA budget!)

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To: [upchuck](#)

Thought our SC FReepers might be interested in this. It would be a sad day if the park is turned over for development.

5 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 10:11:55 AM by [PistolPalmMama](#) (Ai-Queda can recruit on college campuses but the US military can't! --FReeper airborne)

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To: [saganite](#)

It might be harder to do this time, with Chimney Rock being much more high-profile. It could pit the public's disgust with unfair takings against the public's competing desire to see something like Chimney Rock stay as pristine as possible.

If the state really wants it, they should abandon their bogus, low-ball appraisal. To satisfy constitutional requirements, they should use an honest appraisal upon which to base their offer.

6 posted on Sunday, August 13, 2006 10:13:09 AM by [Aetius](#)

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To: [southernnorthcarolina](#)

I don't believe they are paying taxes on a 55 million dollar piece of land. They've been more than happy to pay taxes on a very small estimated value of the land.