

# LAKE: Gov. Easley signs off on state park expansion on Thursday

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best kind.

"Where it's a win, win situation."

The governor spoke to a select crowd invited to the announcement. A crowd full of key players including supporters, negotiators, environmentalists, businessmen, representatives, county officials and more.

The entire presentation was filled with a sense of comradeship and pride at what could be accomplished when everyone involved comes together to work out a plan.

Easley told the crowd that protecting open lands and watersheds doesn't have to hinder economic growth.

"You are preserving something people love," Easley said. "You can't buy it and you can't get it anywhere other than here."

Tom Johnson, Burke County commissioner chairman and a key player in helping find a solution among Crescent, the county and the conservationists, spoke before the governor and let his guard down a little to express his happiness.

"What a day!" Johnson shouted. "I can't believe it!"

Two years ago, Johnson said, he took over as county chairman with a downward spiraling economy, job loss, a multi-million dollar lawsuit over land use at the lake and after his first day

he walked home with his head hanging.

But Johnson said he took his father's sage advice to follow hard times and make a plan to lead the county out of its economic hardships.

"We needed to diversify from 100 percent manufacturing that leaves every 60 years," Johnson said.

Tourism, through smart development at Lake James, was key to Johnson's and the county's vision to bring Burke out of economic darkness.

"This is an example of what can be done when people get out of the courtroom, get into the conference room and close the doors," Johnson said. "We can, we must and we are recovering."

Susie Hamrick Jones, executive director of the Foothills Conservancy, was full of thanks during the event and received much thanks in return for the efforts of the conservancy and its role in creating an acceptable land deal.

"This has been six, seven, eight years of work by thousands of people we will never know," Jones said.

Jones thanked Crescent for the gift to help secure the land and said she will be even happier when the deed is signed over to the people.

"That gift will help protect the viewshed, the watershed..." and

much more, she said.

Other people who have been involved since the beginning, Paul Braun, founder of Citizens to Save Lake James, was singled out and thanked by Easley for all his efforts. Easley gave Braun credit for starting the petition drive, getting the signatures and getting the public involved.

"Paul, you have built this thing with a pencil, and we truly appreciate everything you've done," Easley said. "God bless you."

Braun, speaking before the announcement and arrival of the governor, said the fact that eight years of work was coming to fruition was hard to believe.

"That map (which illustrates the 3,000 acres of park) is worth being jubilant over," Braun said pointing to a display next to the stage with the land of the park extension as a backdrop. "It represents eight years of dedication and work by the people of the county."

"It represents an idea of local sportsman saying, 'Wouldn't this (an expanded state park) be great.'"

And Braun, who once stood on and opposite side of the line from Crescent said he was thankful for the work the company has done.

"I really think the most positive thing that happened was the

team of negotiators being Jim Mozley, Mark Pernar, Patty Richards and Troy Lucas," Braun said. "They saw the vision and created the real turning point."

"At that point, Crescent Resources began to work in truly good faith to make this happen and work toward this park expansion."

Braun said Crescent didn't have to take the noble steps and do the right thing.

"They deserve full credit for the good things they are doing," Braun said. "I'm truly grateful."

Braun was thanked for his conservationists efforts while business leader Mike Fulenwider was thanked by the governor for his efforts to do the right thing by the lake.

"I can't think of another event in Burke County that's ever occurred that had as much economic impact," Fulenwider said. "And the key is the public, private partnership."

Fulenwider said the partnership between Crescent, the state and the conservation agencies, and their efforts to leverage funds from multiple sources, is what made the park expansion a reality.

"Now we can start making a real solid plan for the future," Fulenwider said.

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streets.

"We are going to send around 50 people to that area to clean it up, do landscaping and whatever else needs to be done outside to make it look pretty," Norvelle said.

Another group will be assisting Foothills Service Projects by installing handicap ramps and a new kitchen floor in

someone's house.

Foothills Service Projects, a non-profit organization, makes home repairs for the elder, and disabled in Burke and Caldwell counties, said R.L. Icard, who heads up the program.

"We use the money we get (from the United Way) to buy materials and use volunteers to do work," Icard said. "(On Friday) These volunteers will be building three handicap

ramps and repairing a floor in someone's kitchen.

"These projects help them get in and out of their homes easier."

The final project of the day is to package several meals to send to a non-profit organization, Horizon, which sends packaged meals to needy people all over the world.

"Our goal is to package 3,000 meals," Norvelle said.

The churches will wrap things up around 12:30 p.m., regroup at First Presbyterian and have lunch.

"Our goal for next year is to get even more churches," Norvelle said. "We want to work on expanding the project and include more churches."

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