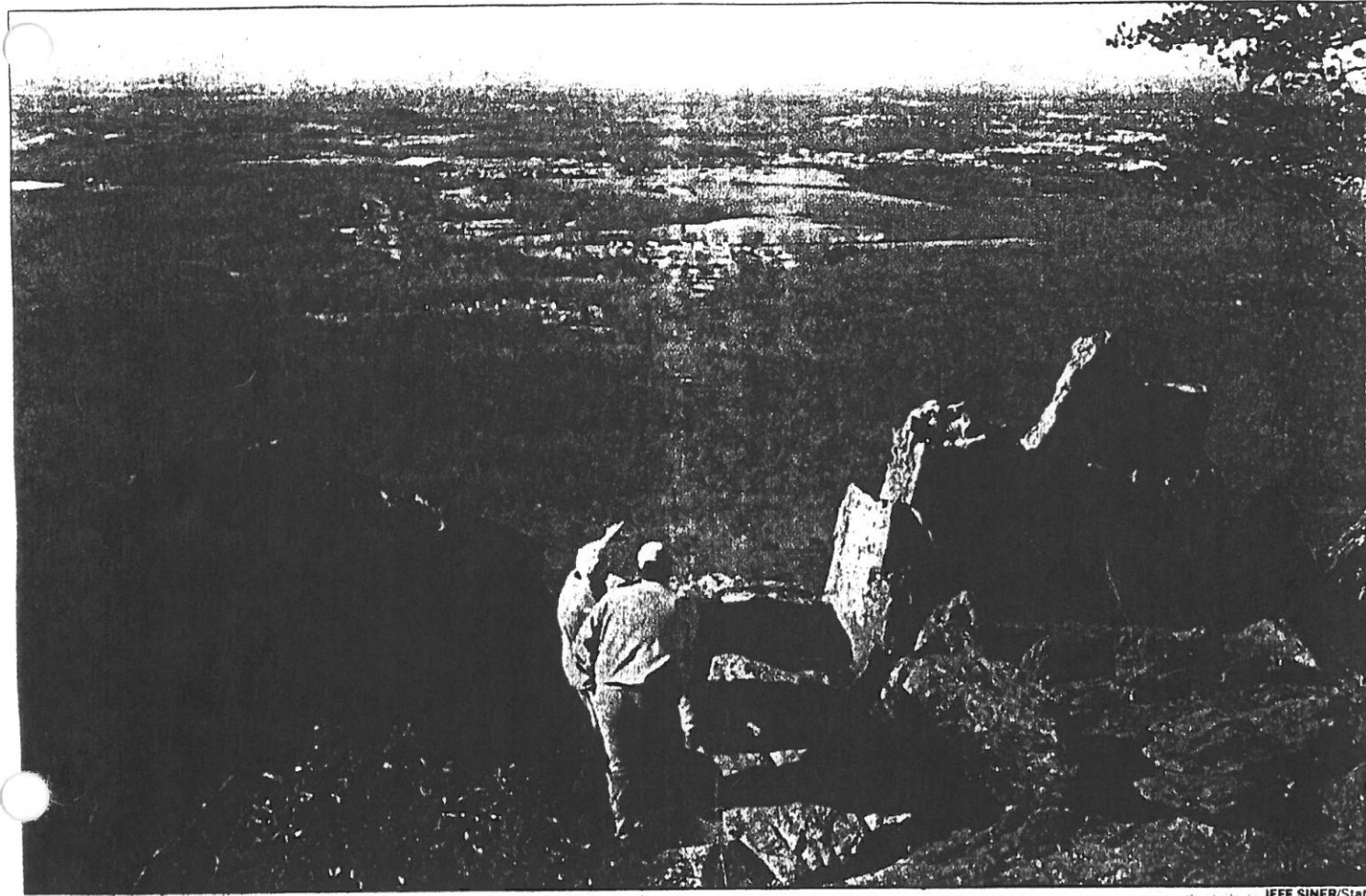


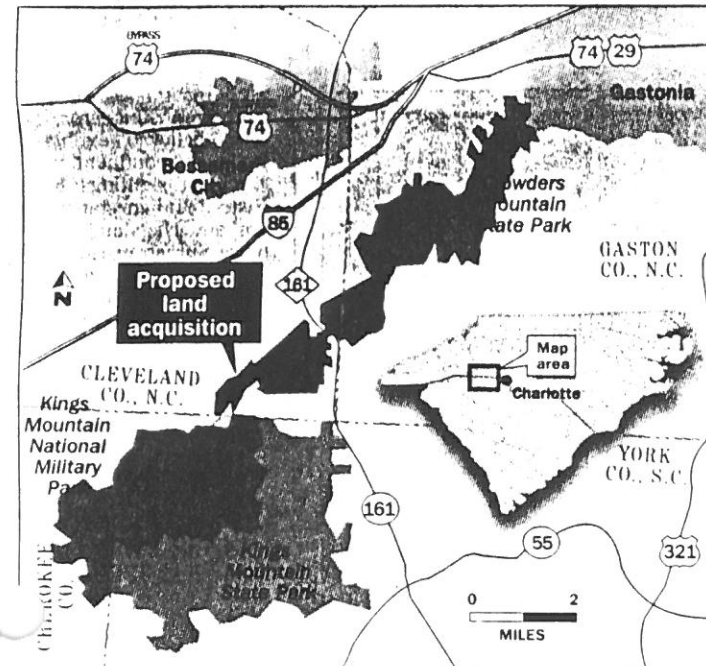
Land sale could imperil hiking dream



JEFF SINER/Staff

A haze hangs over the ridges near Crowders Mountain State Park recently. A nonprofit group is interested in buying 1,100 acres that would

connect Crowders Mountain State Park with Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Park.



GEORGE BREISACHER/Staff

Developer vying for acres many hope will link 3 Carolinas parks

By JOE DePRIEST
Staff Writer

KINGS MOUNTAIN — It's an ambitious plan: linking two state parks and a national park into a 15,000-acre preserve with a common trail system.

Hikers could spend days exploring mountain terrain — all less than an hour west of Charlotte.

The nonprofit Conservation Fund has worked quietly for months to buy the 1,100 acres that would complete the deal. It would connect Crowders Mountain State Park in North Carolina with Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina.

But now there's a new twist — a major private developer wants the land. People who've heard about the potential threat aren't happy.

"All I ever hear is you can't stop development — it's coming," said

Angel Frazier, who lives near the Kings Mountain range. "I'm sick of it. We need to protect our open space. Connecting these parks would be wonderful. We need to preserve this for our kids in the future."

The Arlington, Va.-based Conservation Fund, which helps put together preservation projects such as the Pocosin Lakes Natural Wildlife Refuge in Eastern North Carolina, has been working to get an option on 1,100 acres of ridgeline property linking the two state parks.

The conservation group would then offer the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation the chance to buy the land within a year, potentially with money from a state conservation trust.

But Conservation Fund board member Michael Leonard of Winston-

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Potential land sale imperils hikers' dream for parks

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Salem said he was working on the deal with the owners when they told him of the developer's offer. He doesn't know the company's name or its plans for the property. Cleveland County, where more than half the tract is located, has no countywide zoning law.

The current property owners are heirs of J.O. Plonk Sr. and M.L. Plonk. A family spokesman had no comment on their dealings with either the Conservation Fund or the developer.

Jimmy Maney, city manager in

Kings Mountain, N.C., acknowledged that a large developer is looking at large tracts around the mountain range but wouldn't identify the company.

"There's no firm plan, and we haven't seen anything in writing," Maney said.

In recent years, upscale growth has boomed in eastern Cleveland County, partly because of its proximity to Interstate 85 and Charlotte and partly because of the attraction of nearby Moss Lake. But not until now have developers begun to show interest in the land around the mountains.

For now, Leonard said it's a wait-and-see situation, but he remains hopeful the parks can be connected.

"This would create a 15,000-acre natural area on the west side of one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country," said Leonard, a member of the Conservation Fund's National Advisory Council. "It's an amazing opportunity. If we don't manage to pull this off, the next generation will say, 'Gee, what an opportunity we lost.' If it's not done now, we won't ever have the chance again."

'Once in a lifetime chance'

If the Conservation Fund plan prevails, a new six-mile trail from the Crowders Mountain park would hook up with another new trail at Kings Mountain State Park just across the S.C. border. Trails in the S.C. park are already linked with neighboring Kings Mountain National Military Park.

The land acquisition also would preserve most of the ridgeline of the 12-mile Kings Mountain range, which rolls through Gaston and Cleveland counties in North Carolina and York County, S.C.

Leonard, who grew up in Charlotte, hiked the Kings Mountain range as a teen-ager.

"It's beautiful country," he said. "If these trails are tied together, it'll open up a real long-distance hiking opportunity."

A daylong hike through the small but rugged Kings Mountain range can be anything from an easy stroll to an exhausting climb over rocky slopes. The two highest peaks rise in the northern end of the range — 1,625-foot Crowders Mountain and 1,705-foot Kings Pinnacle. Both are inside the boundaries of Crowders Mountain State Park.

Rock climbers can scale sheer cliffs from 100 to 150 feet high. Trails are flanked by laurel and rhododendron, and some ferns grow more than 6 feet tall. Some of the few American chestnut trees



JEFF SINER/Staff

Craig Harrison of Charlotte checks out the view from Kings Pinnacle at Crowders Mountain State Park recently. The nonprofit Conservation Fund has worked for months to buy the 1,100 acres that would allow them to connect Crowders Mountain State Park in North Carolina with Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Park in South Carolina.

still left in the state grow in the ridgetop forests. Deer, bobcats, wild turkeys, muskrat and raccoon along with more than 160 species of birds flourish in the forests.

From Kings Pinnacle, the mountain range runs south and tapers off in elevation as it rolls into the two parks in South Carolina. At this end, visitors can swim in a spring-fed lake and visit early American historic sites.

"This is a chance to build on assets the public already has — three parks," Leonard said. "The importance is linking them and

getting more bang for the bucks. You enhance the value of assets you already have."

Carol Tingley, chief of planning and natural resources with the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, said the land's value goes far beyond its size.

Connecting the three parks "would create a continuous, protected corridor between the natural areas," she says. "This will help retain the population of important species and their migration routes."

If development cropped up

along the ridgeline "we'd lose the corridor, and species in the different parks would suffer from it," Tingley says.

Crowders Mountain park Superintendent Joe Sox called the prospect of three unified parks a "once in a lifetime chance."

"It's probably one of the most significant things in this part of the state," he said.

Tying history together

While the 15,000 acres of combined park land wouldn't be in the same league as the 520,000-acre Great Smoky Mountains National Park, it still would be among the largest recreational areas near Charlotte. South Mountains State Park in Burke County is 12,800 acres and Caesar's Head State Park in Greenville County, S.C., is 7,467 acres.

Conservationists are showing increased interest in linking holdings such as state parks and game-lands. South Carolina's purchase of the 32,000 acres in the Jocassee Gorges in Oconee and Pickens counties, for example, knit together 150,000 acres of public land.

"State lines are drawings on paper and don't mean anything from an environmental standpoint," Leonard said.

Land preservation in the Kings Mountain range goes back nearly 70 years, when a park opened at the site of the Revolutionary War Battle of Kings Mountain.

The Kings Mountain National Military Park — located in York

and Cherokee counties — has a 1½-mile paved trail that rings the steep ridge where Patriots defeated the British on Oct. 7, 1780. With the main focus on history, the park doesn't offer picnicking or camping.

In 1976, six miles of hiking trails were developed within the park and tied in with the trail system at Kings Mountain State Park.

Opened in 1940, the state park has everything from swimming and paddle boating to camping and picnicking. Crowders Mountain State Park opened across the N.C. line in 1974.

Even then, N.C. planners thought it would be good to tie all three parks together someday and mentioned the idea in the master plan for Crowders park.

"Every year or two it would get talked about," said Kings Mountain State Park Superintendent Frank Couch. "Everybody said it was a great idea, but nobody ever did anything."

He called the ridgeline property "the keystone of one of the most significant land-protection opportunities in this region."

"It would open up all sorts of recreational opportunities," Couch said. "It would probably be the biggest thrill of my career. And a great gift to the citizens of this country."

Staff writer Bruce Henderson contributed to this article. Reach Joe Depriest at (704) 868-7745 or jdepriest@charlotte.com.

PARK PARTICULARS

Crowders Mountain State Park

- **Opened:** 1974.
- **Size:** 3,024 acres.
- **Trail system:** About 15 miles.
- **Activities:** Hiking, rock climbing, camping, canoeing, fishing, picnicking.
- **Visitors per year:** 350,000.
- **Location:** Western Gaston County.
- **Phone:** (704) 533-5375.

Kings Mountain State Park

- **Opened:** 1940.
- **Size:** 6,883 acres.
- **Trails:** About six miles.
- **Activities:** Hiking, horse trails, swimming, paddle boats, camping, picnicking, living history farm.
- **Visitors per year:** 600,000.
- **Location:** Four miles south of Kings Mountain, N.C., off S.C. 161.
- **Telephone:** (803) 222-3209.

Kings Mountain National Military Park

- **Opened:** 1931.
- **Size:** 3,945 acres.
- **Trails:** Six miles hiking, four miles of horse trails.
- **Activities:** Historic site for the Revolutionary War Battle of Kings Mountain; hiking.
- **Visitors per year:** 500,000.
- **Location:** Eight miles south of Kings Mountain, N.C., off S.C. 161.
- **Telephone:** (864) 936-7921.

Sources: Crowders Mountain State Park, Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Park.