

Taproot

A fly fisherman in a light blue shirt, tan vest, and cap is standing in a river, casting a fly. The water is shimmering with sunlight, and the background is a dense forest of green trees.

**Foothills
Conservancy of
North Carolina
2019**

Our Mission

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina is a nationally accredited regional land trust that protects the fabric and character of Western North Carolina's landscape forever and for the benefit of all.

We preserve the natural and cultural heritage of our region by conserving scenic and recreational landscapes, productive farms and forests, healthy watersheds, rich biodiversity, and vital wildlife habitat.

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Foothills Conservancy serves eight counties: Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, Lincoln, McDowell, and Rutherford, in three major river basins, which include the Broad, Catawba, and Yadkin.

Board of Directors

Ron Beane, Chairman, Caldwell County
Martha Whitfield, Vice Chairman, Burke and Mecklenburg County
Sallie Craig, Treasurer, Cleveland County
Mike Tanner, Secretary, Rutherford County
Andrew Blumenthal, McDowell and Mecklenburg County
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Jeff MacKinney, Burke County
Meg Nealon, Catawba County
Susan Powers, Caldwell County
Jim Sain, McDowell County
Gordon Scott, Rutherford County
Andrew Kota, Ex-Officio

Staff

Andrew Kota, Executive Director
Beth Willard-Patton, Associate Director
Tom Kenney, Land Protection Director
Ryan Sparks, Stewardship Director
Isaac Crouch, Office & Finance Administrator
Sophie Shelton, Communications & Outreach Associate
Brittany Watkins, Special Projects Coordinator

Consultants

Elly Wells Marketing + Project Management

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PHOTOS: Page 21 by John Payne Photography, pages 20 & 30 Kathy Kmonicek

A Letter from the Executive Director



In Foothills Conservancy's earliest years as a grassroots coalition to protect the South Mountains, its first meetings were held in the homes of the group's founding conservationists. After formally becoming a land trust, the conservancy moved to a more suitable home, in the basement of downtown Morganton's Ervin building — a space fit for a small staff of (eventually) three, to commence the mission of a new land conservation organization.

In 2001, Foothills moved to an upstairs office space at the corner of West Union and North King streets, where, for the next 18 years, it grew from a staff of three to six, completed over 100 conservation projects, developed long-lasting partnerships and a strong base of supporters, and solidified itself as one of the highest achieving land trusts in North Carolina. In this space, Foothills matured as an organization — making do with quirks like the break room-slash-storage closet, with its dorm-sized refrigerator and folding table. Fourteen years ago, I walked into that office unannounced and met with conservancy staff. The next week, I joined the land trust as an intern.

The landscape where we work — eight counties in Western North Carolina about the size of Connecticut — has not grown since the beginning of the organization, but our opportunities, responsibilities and duty to protect the natural environment have grown tremendously. Our staff has also recently grown with the addition of Brittany Watkins, special projects coordinator, who we welcomed to the team in August.

We soon recognized that in order to continue to flourish as a land trust, we needed to find a space to call our own — one that met the growing needs of our growing organization. In 2018, with financing from Morganton Savings Bank, we purchased our new Morganton home base at 204 Avery Ave., an office that accommodates our seven employees with room to grow. We now have our own parking lot, a lovely break room and kitchenette, and a separate building to store equipment and supplies used for conservation land stewardship and management. Foothills' new home gives our staff, board and supporters a sense of permanence of place — echoing our mission of permanence for the land and water we protect.

We want the outcomes of our conservation work to be accessible to the people and communities that we serve, much like our office is now. It is a space that enables us to usher in exciting land protection and outdoor recreation projects, as well as new community conservation efforts. It serves as a gathering place for our staff and board — a space where we can openly welcome the community, our partners and supporters.

With our new building comes new conservation opportunities and a renewed commitment to connect our work to the communities and people we serve, fostering a new generation of conservationists with the same dedication to protecting our treasured natural heritage, forests, rivers, family farms and recreation areas.

Sincerely,

Andrew Kota
Executive Director

By the Numbers

Conservation Record

2018: 1,114 acres permanently conserved

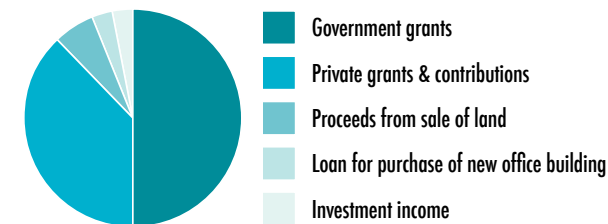
In 2018, Foothills Conservancy and our public and private partners invested \$3,351,742 to protect 1,114 acres in 11 projects, leveraged by \$867,346 in donated land value. 1995-2018: 54,929 Acres Protected.

Financial Summary

January 1, 2018 – December 31, 2018

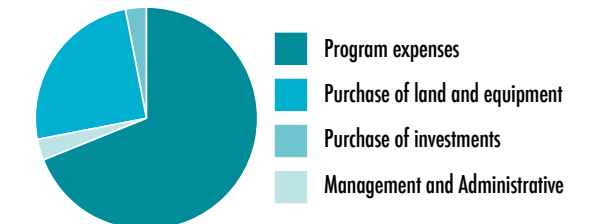
Fiscal Year 2018 Sources of Funds

Private grants & contributions.....	\$1,502,377
Government grants.....	\$2,006,406
Proceeds from sale of land.....	\$224,143
Loan for purchase of new office building.....	\$115,000
Investment income.....	\$131,860
Total Source of Funds.....	\$3,979,786



Fiscal Year 2018 Use of Funds

Program Services:	
Purchase of land & equipment.....	\$1,108,853
Purchase of investments.....	\$149,293
Program expenses.....	\$3,063,513
Management & Administrative.....	\$112,075
Total Use of Funds.....	\$4,433,734



FCNC ASSETS

Current Assets

	2018	2017
Cash & Equivalents.....	\$2,798,760	\$3,352,403
Receivables.....	\$25,090	\$6,555
Prepaid Expenses.....	\$0	\$4,360
Total Current Assets.....	\$2,823,850	\$3,363,318

Long-term Assets

Conservation Property & Equipment.....	\$10,111,559	\$8,379,429
Total Long-Term Assets.....	\$10,111,559	\$8,379,429
Total Assets.....	\$12,935,409	\$11,742,747

FCNC LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS

Current Liabilities.....	\$115,000	\$600,784
Total Net Assets.....	\$12,820,409	\$11,141,963
Total Liabilities & Net Assets.....	\$12,935,409	\$11,742,747

Endowment & Reserve Funds (as of Dec 31 2018)

Easement Stewardship Endowment Fund.....	\$400,545	\$366,042
Preserve Stewardship Endowment Fund.....	\$158,407	\$107,222
Burke County Endowment Fund.....	\$57,863	\$59,055
Blue Ridge Foothills Fund.....	\$1,122,984	\$153,342
Preserve Maintenance Fund BB&T.....	\$42,738	\$128,791
Land Acquisition Fund BB&T.....	\$410,861	\$567,049
Legal Defense Fund BB&T.....	\$119,286	\$104,010
For Now & Forever Fund BB&T.....	\$101,230	\$546,104
Program & Operations Reserve Fund BB&T.....	\$442,604	\$567,868


Our Big Backyard

In June, Foothills Conservancy celebrated the successful second year of its now-annual summer camp, dubbed Our Big Backyard, a weeklong traveling day camp bringing unique, fun and educational nature-based adventures to local children.

This past summer, 50 campers attended the program — 10 more campers than in 2018.

The camp is presented in partnership with the N.C. Cooperative Extension-Burke County Center, and funded by Burke County United Way, Carolinas HealthCare Systems Blue Ridge Foundation, International Paper Foundation, Burke Youth Organized Philanthropists and Burke Women's Fund.

Day-to-day activities were made possible through the participation of:

Adventure Bound Books, Burke County 4-H, Camp Grier, Chick-fil-A, Downtown Morganton, Food Matters Market - Morganton, Greenway Public Transportation, Homer's, Lake James State Park, the Morganton Farmers Market, Perry's Berry's, South Mountains State Park, Subway of Morganton, TOSS Studios and Whistle Stop Pizza and Subs. 



Luci and Tristan investigate owl pellets for bones from various owl meals.



Gracie searches under rocks for aquatic creatures that indicate the cleanliness of the water in Paddy Creek.



Lake James State Park volunteer points out tiny critters that live in the creeks and rivers of Western North Carolina.



Harper walks like a raccoon on the Holly Discovery Trail at Lake James State Park.

Our Big Backyard

Left: Campers make their own masterpieces with TOSS Studios, using paint in spray bottles and materials directly from nature.

Middle: Tati picks blueberries for homemade jam at Perry's Berry's.

Right: Campers enjoy a natural water slide at Camp Grier in Old Fort.





Over the Mountains & Through the Woods

Wilderness Gateway State Trail / Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail

For Catawba, Burke, McDowell and Rutherford counties, a new long-distance trail is in the works. Once complete, the wilderness of Western North Carolina will connect to the Piedmont foothills — scaling the South Mountains, traversing forested valleys and mountain peaks and following a corridor west to join the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail near Chimney Rock State Park.

Officially joining the North Carolina State Trail System in June, the aptly named Wilderness Gateway State Trail, introduced to state law through House Bill 532, is one of two new additions to the state trail system this summer. This conceptual footpath and river trail will stretch 40 or 50 miles in length, depending on the final route, and will connect Hickory, Valdese and greater Catawba County to natural areas in the region, improving access from these areas to South Mountains State Park and beyond.

“The concept of the trail is to create long-distance connections to natural places across this area of Western North Carolina, making the foothills region

a significant hub for outdoor recreation,” said Andrew Kota, executive director of Foothills Conservancy. “It’s a forward-thinking regional plan. Creating this trail not only helps conserve our natural areas, it improves access to open spaces, and that comes with substantial economic benefits. Smaller towns like Morganton, Valdese, Marion, Old Fort, Hickory, Rutherfordton — these rural towns and cities and counties are always looking for ways to attract business and young professionals. Having natural, accessible attractions in the area makes it more desirable to companies, tourists and young families.”

Though it will take years to complete the trail, small sections are already being planned, with potential construction in the coming year.

“It’s a long-term effort, but we already have a huge head-start,” said Tom Kenney, land protection director at Foothills. “A private conservationist supports the state trail and owns connected lands for most of the proposed corridor, from state-owned public lands in the South Mountains west toward Hickory Nut Gorge

State Trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Foothills Conservancy also owns lands east toward Catawba County that could help route the Wilderness Gateway State Trail.”

Initial trail design and construction efforts are being planned for a spectacular natural area in McDowell County, where the trail could cross paths with the designated route of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, the second of two trails added to the N.C. State Trails system this summer.

The Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail follows the 240-year-old route of hardened Appalachian frontiersmen, marching over the mountains into battle (and toward a pivotal and famous victory) at the height of the American Revolutionary War.

As history buffs may already be aware: This legendary trail still exists in segments today, registered to the U.S. National Trails System for its historic significance — its route winding through Virginia, Tennessee and the Carolinas. Its addition to the North Carolina State Trail

System enables State Parks and other state agencies to coordinate with the National Park Service on trail development and the acquisition of lands or easements for the trail. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of the Overmountain Victory Trail is located in Foothills Conservancy’s land trust service area.

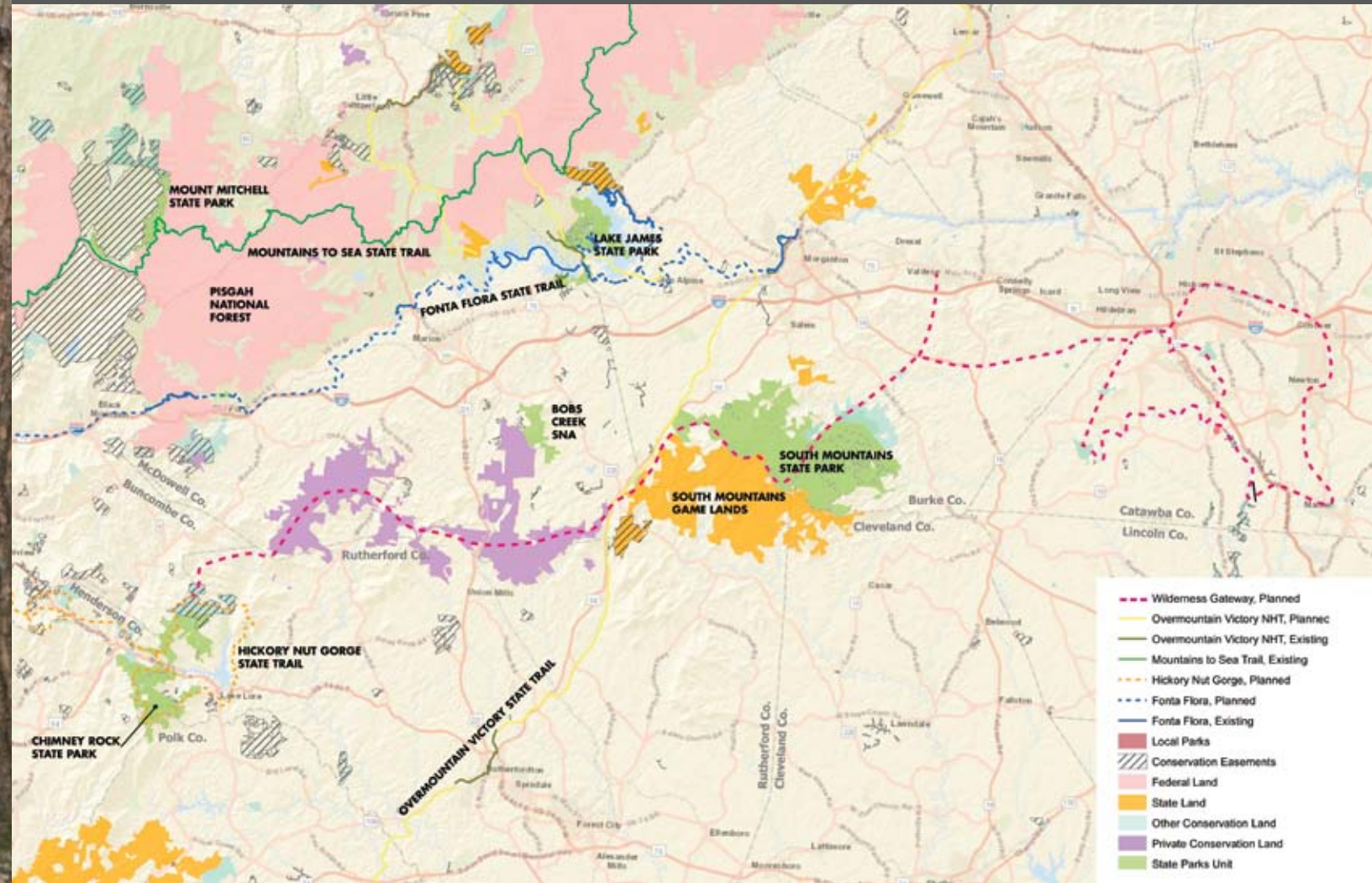
“ The concept of the trail is to create long-distance connections to natural places across this area of Western North Carolina, making the foothills region a significant hub for outdoor recreation

A feasibility study for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail is underway by N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation trails planning staff to determine the most practical route for its corridor. Other efforts by interested, regional stakeholders are in progress, to plan the North Carolina corridor for the Overmountain Victory Trail. N.C. State Parks is responsible for planning the new Wilderness Gateway State Trail.

Over the Mountains & Through the Woods



Wilderness Gateway State Trail



In the years to come, Foothills Conservancy will assist in this process, locating potential segments of these two trails — and Foothills has already helped with the acquisition and conservation of several key parcels, such as those in Catawba County and along the border of the South Mountains State Park. (For more on Foothills’ Catawba County parkland, turn to page 14.)

“...providing access to natural land, conserving land to protect our resources, encouraging people to go out and experience nature and improve their mental, physical and overall well-being.”

For the sections of planned trail not currently under state

protection, “that’s where partnerships will come heavily into play,” Kenney explained. “Wherever there is state parkland, like the South Mountains State Park, they will be the leading partner in planning and building the trail. But, for other areas, we’ll have to find local partners to manage 5 or 10-mile sections.”

Kota added, “The conservancy is taking somewhat of a leap in a new direction. We have a new staff member, Brittany, our special projects coordinator, and her

responsibilities will be to focus on trail projects and continue to build our volunteer program — and we think one of our biggest volunteer opportunities in the upcoming months and years will be with this Wilderness Gateway State Trail. Yes, it will take some time. It’ll take work and partners and people-power, but it’s exciting. A new state trail doesn’t happen very often.”

The Wilderness Gateway State Trail and Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail will become the seventh and eighth trails in the North Carolina State Trails System — and the fourth and fifth to pass through Foothills Conservancy’s service region, which already includes segments of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, the Fonta Flora

State Trail and the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail.

“It’s such a great opportunity to add more outdoor recreation options to the region,” Kota said. “It benefits the public in more ways than one — providing access to natural land, conserving land to protect our resources, encouraging people to go out and experience nature and improve their mental, physical and overall well-being. And, of course, the economic benefits are huge. It will add up to something really significant.”

Life Aquatic

Conservation of Catawba County Parklands around the Jacob Fork & Henry Fork rivers

When Keith and Jen Townsend, partners with Oakwood Preserve, LLC, bought a large property in scenic Catawba County, their initial plan was to build a home on the property and retain about 50 undeveloped acres. However, after years of owning the land and a change in development plans, they decided to move on to another option.

“It was both of our desire to preserve the land in its current state if we didn’t keep it to build a house,” Keith explained. Oakwood Preserve began communication with Foothills Conservancy to permanently preserve the property.

And Foothills is certainly glad that they did. Though the property is relatively close to Hickory and major area roadways, it remains a particularly rural piece of Catawba County, dominated by farms, extensive woodlands and a rugged landscape — making it a perfect candidate for both outdoor recreation and conservation.

“We have been very interested in conservation and acquiring park lands in Catawba County around the Jacob Fork and Henry Fork rivers, and the Oakwood Preserve property offered a great starting place — not only because of the property’s scenic qualities, but because of its great natural resources and adjacency to the Jacob Fork River,” said Tom Kenney, land protection director at Foothills Conservancy. “Our interest in these rivers goes back to Foothills’ beginnings: Both rivers begin in the South Mountains State Park, and Foothills has been focused on conserving the South Mountains landscape and the watersheds that originate there for decades.

“Our goal in Catawba County is to create a premiere, regional outdoor destination in partnership with N.C. State Parks, and this property’s location is ideal,” Kenney continued. “It’s minutes from Hickory, I-40 and U.S. 321, and it offers a variety of hiking, mountain biking and river paddling access opportunities.”

In April 2019, Foothills purchased 188 acres of Catawba County woodlands — the Oakwood Preserve property and next door property owned by Marcia and Jimmy Ray Thompson. The acquisition was funded with help from a private loan and a grant from the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund. The next step? Transfer the beautiful property to N.C. State Parks to plan public river and trail access for all to enjoy. And a plan is already in the works.

This past summer, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper signed a law authorizing the N.C. State Parks system to



Jacob Fork River

acquire and manage the Catawba County property as part of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. (Read more about the Wilderness Gateway State Trail on Page 10). State Parks will arrange conservation funding for the acquisition of the lands within the next year or two.

"It's a two-step property acquisition process," Kenney explained. "And the important first step was successfully completed by Foothills."

Its conservation permanently protects over 1 1/2 miles of forest along the Jacob Fork River, preserving water quality for both rare aquatic species and natural river ecosystems that benefit water quality, which, in this case, positively impacts the City of Newton's public drinking water supply. The tract also includes an N.C. Natural Heritage Program-designated natural area, the Jacob Fork East Corridor, and preserves outstanding scenic views from the river for canoers and kayakers.

"This land is key to providing more public river access and future outdoor enjoyment for the residents of Hickory, Catawba County and visitors from across the state," Kenney said. "It's not only beneficial from a conservation

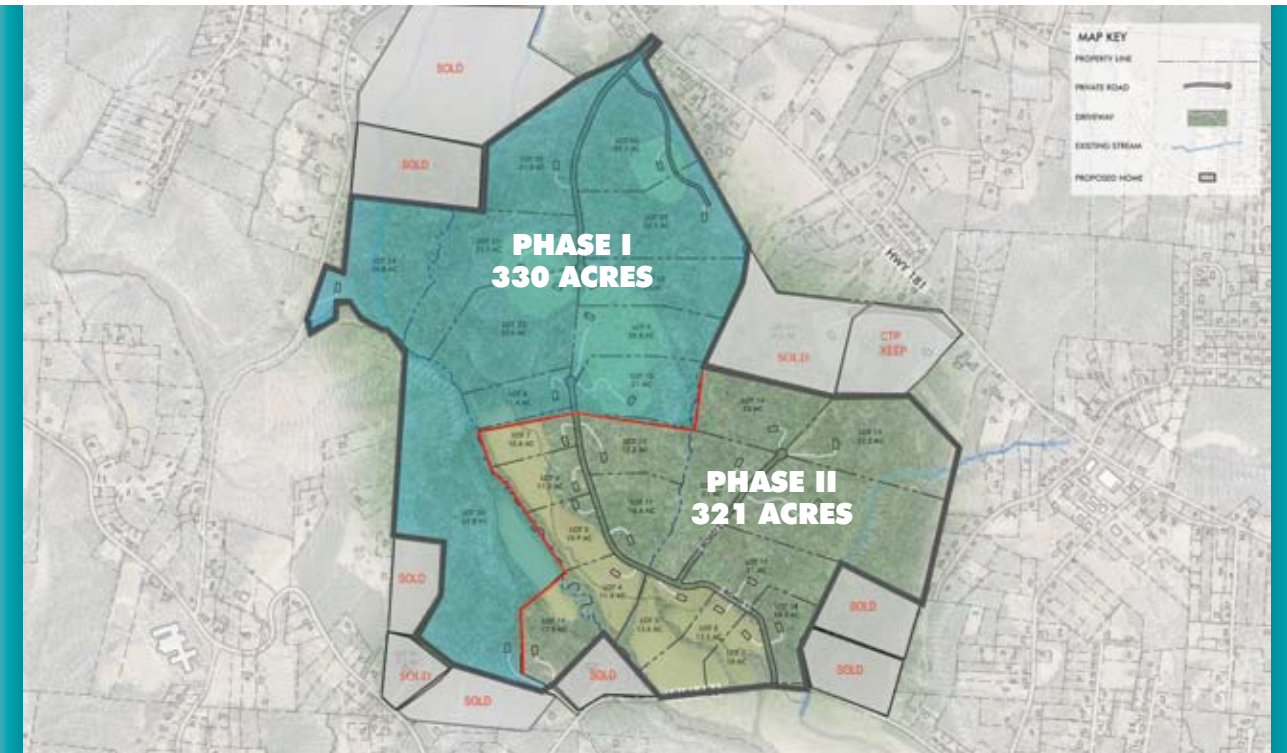
standpoint. It has significant economic benefits — tourism, new business recruitment and local economic development. Companies look for amenities to attract potential employees from across the state, and trails, river access and outdoor recreation foster new businesses in more rural areas of North Carolina."

Future Catawba County parklands, when complete, would connect the town of Hickory and the Henry Fork and Jacob Fork rivers to South Mountains State Park through the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, providing improved public access to the park from I-40 and larger cities.

"All of these outdoor activities will probably take years to come to fruition, but it can begin with river access by 2021 — designating at least one location on the acquired properties for people to paddle, fish and hike the land bordering the river," Kenney said. "We really look forward to the day when these lands become a community resource for Catawba County, its citizens and visitors, and we are extremely grateful to be able to work with these landowners, our state and local partners to acquire and preserve these beautiful lands."



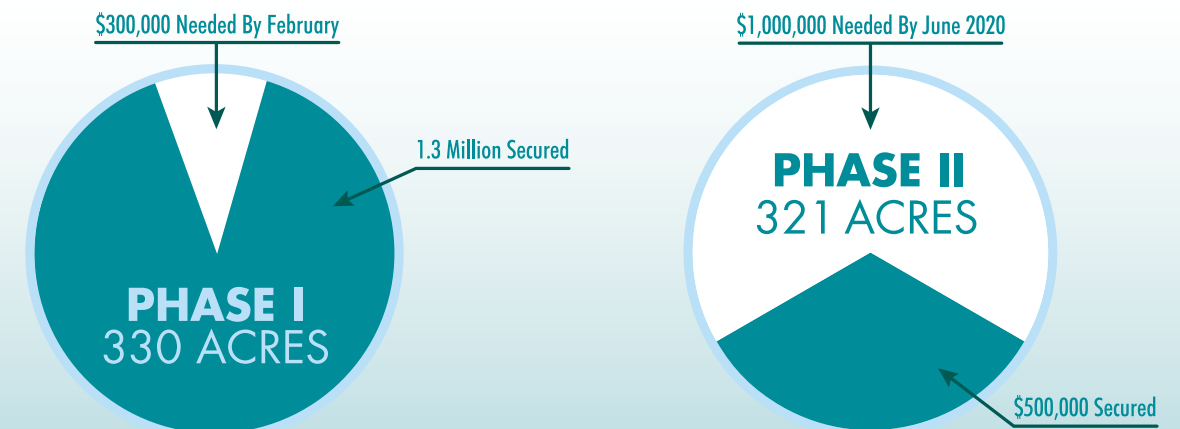
DONATE TODAY! Oak Hill Community Park & Forest



Foothills Conservancy needs YOU to help save a 651-acre property just 10 minutes from downtown Morganton for the site of a future public park in the Oak Hill community. Once acquired and protected, the conservancy will work with city, state and local partners to eventually offer public recreation and environmental education opportunities. Read more about the proposed amenities at:

foothillsconservancy.org/oakhillpark

The conservancy has raised 1.8 million of the \$3.1 million needed to purchase all 651 acres. The sellers have granted a six-month extension if Foothills Conservancy acquires half of the property by February 2020.

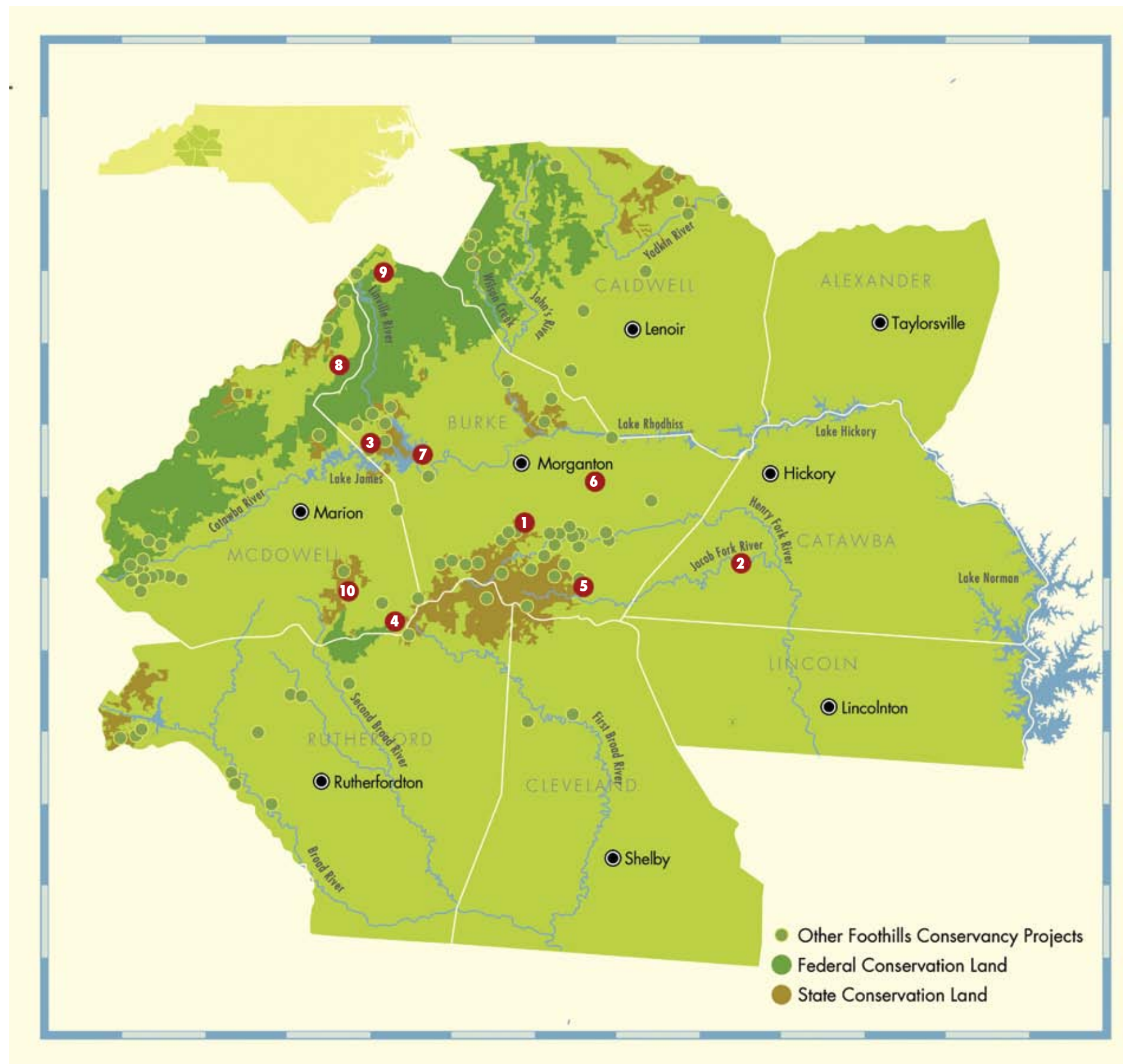


**Make your contribution today! foothillsconservancy.org/donate
828-437-9930 • akota@foothillsconservancy.org**

Foothills Footprint

Recent Projects Around Our Service Area

- 1 Little Cedar Mountain**
96 acres acquired by Foothills Conservancy for future addition to N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's South Mountains Game Lands and to benefit N.C. State Parks
- 2 Jacob Fork East - Catawba County Parklands**
188-acre acquisition for future state park in Catawba County and Jacob Fork River access associated with Wilderness Gateway State Trail
- 3 Paddy Creek - Lake James State Park**
36-acre Foothills Conservancy acquisition and transfer to Lake James State Park
- 4 Cane Creek Meadow**
20-acre donation of land along Overmountain Victory Trail corridor adjoining N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's South Mountains Game Land
- 5 South Mountains Preserve Addition**
90-acre donation of land expanding the conservancy's 1,800-acre South Mountains Headwaters Preserve



- 6 Mineral Springs Mountain**
45-acre acquisition by Foothills Conservancy for future transfer to N.C. State Parks / Wilderness Gateway State Trail
- 7 Misty Meadows Farm**
195-acre agricultural conservation easement acquisition by Foothills Conservancy with a grant from N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
- 8 Overmountain Victory Trail - Linville Mountain Trailhead**
8-acre acquisition by Foothills Conservancy with public trailhead and access for Overmountain Victory Trail to Pisgah National Forest
- 9 Jonas Ridge Bog**
17-acre acquisition to preserve a N.C. Natural Area (Jonas Ridge Wetlands) in partnership with Burke County and N.C. Clean Water trust fund, including future public nature trail
- 10 Bobs Creek State Natural Area Phase II**
2,200-acre acquisition assist to expand N.C. State Parks' State Natural Area



7th Annual Sweet Lucy's Affair

On Sept. 14, individuals from 11 communities gathered to celebrate the conservation efforts that make Lake James a premier destination for locals and visitors alike.

Thanks to contributions made by Leadership Circle hosts, sponsorships by Benthos, Lake James Custom Homes and the Lake James Sales Team, as well as

ticket sales, additional donations and support from Camp Lake James, a record \$72,000 was raised for Foothills Conservancy.

Guests at the event were treated to Richard and Catherine Turner's acclaimed smoked barbecue, accompanied by a menu of classic sides from Countryside Barbecue in Marion.

We would like to extend our most sincere gratitude to the Sweet Lucy's Affair Leadership Circle for their extraordinary support in planning this critical fundraiser:

Jim & Tammy Basinger
 Steve & Mary Boehm
 Bill & Gwen Bradley
 Spencer & Donna Cash
 Javier & Ynggrid Chacon
 Mike & Brooke Chamberlain
 Philip & Annette Chamberlain
 Tom & Geneva Coffey
 George & Ann Costello
 Rick & Danyel Harris
 Greg & Paula Hoogerland
 Bob & Shari Kehlor

Rob & Katie Kirby
 Joe & Kate Lagedrost
 BJ & Ellen Losch
 George & Carter MacBain
 Jeff & Carol MacKinney
 Jim & Caroline Mandeville
 Ed McMillan & Margie Divish
 George & Paula Moore
 Lee & Beth Neale
 Steve & Lisa Nikrant
 Chuck & Jerelen Ohrt
 Gresham Orrison & Susie Hamrick Jones

Jeremy & Virginia Purbrick
 Doug Robinson & Inez Serventi
 Craig & Lisa Romer
 Tim Roush & Jennifer Kersten
 Jeff & Linda Schilling
 Richard & Catherine Turner
 Jim & Jean Veilleux
 Doug & Liz White
 Chip & Martha Whitfield
 Steve & Janie Witte

10th Annual Flavors of the Foothills

More than 200 guests arrived at the Morganton Community House on Oct. 12 for a chance to bid on unique auction items, from pottery to weekend getaways, at the 10th annual Flavors of the Foothills. After working up hearty appetites at the auction, attendees strolled through the streets of downtown, where a locally sourced feast awaited — a farm-to-fork dinner with ingredients harvested by the community's farmers, growers and homesteaders.

and The Natural Olive — with additional thanks to the City of Morganton Main Street Office, Curbside Composting, Freedom High School, Patton High School, Morganton Community House, Morganton Farmers Market and Simply Green Recycling.

Garden Gate Downtown generously donated flowers for festive table arrangements.

The 10th annual Flavors of the Foothills was made possible by the evening's hosts:

Blue Ridge Level Hosts

Ann & George Costello
 Equinox Environmental
 Randy & Lea Loftis
 Gresham Orrison & Susie Hamrick Jones
 Chip & Martha Whitfield
 Janet Wilson

Foothills Level Hosts

Jim Belote & Linda Kincaid
 Jeff & Carol MacKinney
 Morganton Humanist Alliance
 Richard & Shara Owensby

Preserver Level Hosts

Ron & Christine Beane
 Gaston & Candice Berenguer
 Andrew Blumenthal
 Robin Brackett
 Branch Banking & Trust Co.
 Peg Broyhill & Curtis Braswell
 Chimney Rock State Park
 Sallie Craig
 Tom & Sandra Foster
 Lex & Michelle Gary
 Jim Goldsmith
 Andrew & Shannon Kota
 Bob & Susan Powers
 Gordon & Judy Scott
 Jim Sitts
 Squeak & Connie Smith
 Mike & Lynne Tanner



The fall celebration raised \$43,000 for land and water resource conservation in the foothills of Western North Carolina.

We'd like to extend a special "thank you" to those who provided food and drink at the event: Blue Ridge View Farm, Bluebird Farm, Brown Mountain Bottleworks, Fonta Flora Brewery, Food Matters Market - Morganton, Forget-Me-Not-Farm, J&J Farms



BREWS & VIEWS

In the spring and summer of 2019, we headed for the hills — the foothills, that is! Foothills Conservancy staff and board members made special appearances in various establishments throughout the organization’s eight-county service region to spread the word about conservation projects.

In April, **Newgrass Brewing Co.** in downtown Shelby hosted staff and board members for an afternoon of mimosas, hot pretzels, craft beer and success stories from around Cleveland County with members of the local community.



Then, in May, we set up at **Spillway Bridge & Co.** in Marion on open mic night — enjoying good conversation, delicious sliders from McDowell Local, great music and a seemingly endless variety of North Carolina brews.

August’s heat wave proved to be the perfect time for cold beer and mouth-watering burgers. Hitting the spot on a hot summer day, **Fonta Flora Brewery** opened the doors of its **Whippoorwill Dairy Farm brewhouse** to welcome lovers of beer and land alike. Chef Obie Ferguson was on the scene with his new food truck, Singlewyde, whipping up crowd favorites like mac and cheese and burgers from his former Wisteria Southern Gastropub menu.



Summer 2019 started off strong, with \$40,000 in pledges from three important donors — which launched a challenge to conservancy supporters to match those contributions dollar-for-dollar. Thanks to these gifts from generous donors, we reached our \$80,000 goal.

The Foothills Conservancy staff and board are overwhelmed by the continued support of those who make a donation, year after year, to our cause. It is because of you that conservation efforts in this beautiful pocket of Western North Carolina continue to thrive. Thank you!



Still Time to Give
Make a tax-deductible gift between now and Dec. 31! Every dollar you donate is part of our promise to continue protecting land and water resources for you and everyone, forever.



Visit foothillsconservancy.org/donate to make your contribution today.

PADDY CREEK CONSERVATION



In late July, 36 acres were added to Lake James State Park, completing the permanent conservation of a segment of Paddy Creek upstream from where it enters Lake James, and extending the state park boundary west to N.C. Highway 126 and Rock Hill Road.

The new addition — a bargain sale sold for less than market value to N.C. State Parks by Foothills Conservancy — adjoins 41 acres of protected lands at the Whippoorwill Dairy Farm, which the conservancy acquired and donated to N.C. State Parks in 2016.

Purchased from Southmountain Children and Family Services in May 2019, the 36-acres includes a 2,000-linear-foot section of Paddy Creek, a major tributary of Lake James, and its uplands offer scenic views of the Blue Ridge and South mountain ranges. The adjacent Whippoorwill Farm property lies on the opposite banks of the creek — ensuring that this upstream tributary and its downstream water supply remain clear and clean for future visitors to enjoy.

The acquisition and conservation of Whippoorwill Farm was a collaboration between Foothills Conservancy and Fonta Flora Brewery, which opened a farmhouse brewing facility on eight private acres of the former dairy farm, bordering N.C. 126, in 2018.

Encompassing about 77 acres combined, these two additions to Lake James State Park will provide more opportunities for outdoor recreation — including mountain bike trail and creek access, the extension of existing trails on the park lands, and, with borders along two major roadways in the area, increased points of access to public natural space.

Since 2005, Foothills Conservancy has facilitated the addition of more than 3,000 acres to Lake James State Park and, with partners, amassed a total of 11,151 acres permanently conserved around the picturesque lake and its watersheds.



2019 Guardians of the Land

Foothills Conservancy's Guardians of the Land are landowners who choose to protect their properties either by donating conservation easements — in full or in part — or by donating their land outright to permanently preserve the places they cherish. We are pleased to recognize Tim Sweeney, Oakwood Preserve, LLC, and Jim, Margaret "Chip," and Nikki Sitts as our newest Guardians of the Land.

Tim Sweeney

South Mountains Preserve Addition, 90 acres; Cane Creek Meadow, 20 acres

Tim Sweeney's most recent donation of 90 acres to the South Mountains Headwaters Preserve has increased the size of this conservancy-owned and managed property to 1,886 acres, deeming it the second largest of the conservancy's four preserves, which total more than 4,000 acres. Conservation of this property ensures the protection of water quality in the Henry Fork River watershed, as well as 31 acres recognized by Audubon as part of the South Mountains Bird Area. Sweeney's donation of the 20-acre Cane Creek Meadow property is part of a larger conservation effort to connect the South Mountains to the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Oakwood Preserve, LLC

Jacob Fork East, 132 acres

Oakwood Preserve, LLC, made a partial donation of its Catawba County land for use as a future state park and to provide river and trail access along the Jacob Fork River. The parcel of land is part of a collaborative effort to acquire state-owned parklands that will be managed by North Carolina's Division of Parks and Recreation. Conservation of the property permanently protects 1½ miles of forest along the river, which in turn preserves water quality and the downstream drinking water supply.

Keith Townsend, manager of Oakwood Preserve, said he was "glad to help preserve the already clean Jacob Fork River and the integrity of this beautiful piece of land." *(Read more about the Catawba County Parklands on page 14.)*

Jim, Margaret "Chip," and Nikki Sitts (Misty Meadows Farm and Forest, LLC)

Misty Meadows Farm, 195 acres

The conservation easement on Misty Meadows Farm protects productive agricultural land, a variety of forest types, wildlife habitat and surface waters that drain directly into the Catawba River.

The Sitts family purchased the core of their farm in 1998 from Mildred Richards, who, along with her late husband Dee, had owned and lived on the farm for about 50 years. A few years later, the Sitts purchased three smaller, adjoining parcels to create Misty Meadows Farm. Jim, a registered forester, sustainably manages the family's forest land under the guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council. His wife, Chip, and their daughter, Nikki, train their horses using natural horsemanship techniques. The Sitts have always considered themselves to be stewards of their land. As a family, they believe it is important to preserve their working farm and forest for future generations to live and work on the land, providing an excellent and important habitat for area wildlife. *(Top photo courtesy of Nikki Sitts)*





TRAILBLAZER

Twenty minutes from downtown Morganton, birdsong echoes for miles through the trees, interrupted only by the occasional clink-clink-crunch of hikers ambling up the trail.

This undeveloped, forested property, known as Rock Creek, joined Foothills Conservancy's 1,796-acre South Mountains Headwaters Preserve in mid-2018 — and, for the past year, volunteers have been working hard to construct and maintain the Rock Creek Trail, an old logging road-turned-hiking trail.

Just 2 ½ miles out and back, "it's a short, quick hike to a beautiful, 180-degree view into the South Mountains at the top of the trail," said Brittany Watkins, special projects coordinator at Foothills Conservancy, who led the effort to build out the trail. "But as Foothills' first public access project on one of our lands, it was important to dedicate this trail to someone special."

And that special someone is none other than Bob Benner — an 89-year-old hiker, canoer, author, former teacher, founding board member of Foothills Conservancy, conservationist and a founding father of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, where, for decades, he maintained 70 miles of trail in Burke County. Recently, though, health challenges have kept Benner from enjoying his beloved outdoors.

"Growing up, I spent many hours playing outside. I learned to love everything about the outdoors, and early on I realized I wanted to protect them, if I could,"



Benner said. "By hiking and leading hikes all through the area over the years, I realized more and more the importance of saving these lands for future generations to enjoy as we have."

Tom Kenney, land protection director at Foothills Conservancy, said he feels honored to know and have worked with Benner on conservation issues for the last 20 years. "So many people in this area learned how to paddle — or how to build out a hiking trail — thanks to Bob Benner and his passion for environmental protection," he said. "He's been a leader in our region for environmental stewardship, protecting our rivers and streams and advocating for the protection of our natural resources. He's inspired so many, and he's certainly inspired Foothills. We wouldn't have the South Mountains State Park that we have today without Bob Benner — or rivers and streams with some of the best water quality in the state."

Foothills Conservancy and similar organizations will continue generating the interest and support needed to protect these precious lands."

Rock Creek Trail was officially dedicated to Bob Benner at a special ceremony on October 14, 2019. The trail will be open to the public in the spring of 2020.



At the newly constructed trailhead, Foothills erected a sign forever dedicating Rock Creek Trail to Bob Benner, securing his legendary status among hikers for generations to come.

"I truly hope that the influence I have had over the years will inspire future generations to continue seeing the need to conserve and protect the lands we are so fortunate to have here in the foothills of North Carolina," Benner said. "It is my hope that





A GROWING ECONOMY

Committing to the Conservation of Agricultural Lands

Agriculture is North Carolina’s third most important industry, accounting for around 20 percent of jobs in the state, 3.6 percent of the annual economy and more than \$16 billion in annual revenue. Farmland is not only economically vital to the region, but invaluable as a natural and cultural resource, as well.

But, in recent years, pressures from regional growth and development have put a strain on these lands — their relatively flat landscapes often considered for housing subdivisions or commercial lots — and to lose these farmlands means to irreversibly change the face of the region.

That’s why, in 2018, Foothills Conservancy formed a partnership with Conserving Carolina and both the Polk and Rutherford County Soil & Water Conservation Districts to commit to the conservation of agricultural lands — focusing specifically on the region surrounding the Tryon International Equestrian Center.

To devise a plan for conserving these lands, the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina’s

Food and Farming Program awarded a \$15,000 grant to Foothills Conservancy in December 2018.

The resulting Agricultural Lands Conservation Plan, completed in September 2019, identifies 33 individual tracts of land comprising 20 farms as high-priority targets for agricultural conservation easements, a step toward forever preserving these active farmlands for their economic, cultural and natural values.



The plan uses criteria such as soil quality, hydrology and natural and cultural heritage, as well as a property’s land area, contiguity and proximity or adjacency to existing protected lands to identify conservation priorities.

Foothills and its partners’ next step in protecting these important farms is to inform landowners about conservation options for their land, and pursue funding from local, state, federal or other agencies or organizations to support agricultural conservation easement projects. The conservancy plans to meet again with partners in 2020 to evaluate next steps.

Movin’ On Up

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina is officially the proud owner of a building located in downtown Morganton at 204 Avery Avenue. The purchase achieves a long term goal of providing a permanent location for the land trust and a vision of longevity for the organization. It took years of planning to find the perfect property and months of

renovations to prepare the office for daily operations. The purchase by Foothills Conservancy was made possible by a grant from the Alice and Charles Carey Endowment Fund and a loan from Morganton Savings Bank. Our staff love the new digs and it’s a welcome space for the board, supporters and the community.

Foothills Conservancy extends its gratitude to the following businesses and individuals, whose professional services breathed new life into the office building and enhanced the property:

- | | | |
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Ann Costello

2019 Ruby Award



“Ann Costello is an outstanding advocate and champion for the conservation and protection of our precious environment,”

– Ron Beane, board chair of Foothills Conservancy

The Costello's two sons and their families live in the D.C. area — in Maryland and Virginia — where Ann is a regular visitor, doting on her two young grandsons and two-month old granddaughter. She is excited to welcome her fourth grandchild in March of 2020!

In 2017, Ann joined the Foothills Conservancy board of directors and, over the years, has volunteered hundreds of hours to raise thousands of dollars for conservation. Most notable is Ann's role as chairperson of Sweet Lucy's Affair. Under Ann's care, this fundraiser and benefit at Lake James has quickly become the conservancy's highest grossing event, raising \$72,000 in 2019.

“Ann Costello is an outstanding advocate and champion for the conservation and protection of our precious environment,” said Ron Beane, board chair of Foothills Conservancy. “Because of her dedication and commitment to conservation and the environment, no one is more deserving of receiving the Ruby Award than Ann.”

The Ruby Pharr Conservation Volunteer of the Year award — the Ruby Award, for short — is Foothills Conservancy's highest honor for volunteer service. The award is named for its first recipient: the late biologist and educator Ruby Pharr, one of the conservancy's founding board members. This year Foothills Conservancy is honored to announce Ann Costello as the 2019 Ruby Award recipient.

Ann and her husband, George, moved to North Carolina, specifically Lake James, after retiring from careers in the bustling area of Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. According to Ann, it was an easy decision.

“We wanted a place where you could put on a pair of hiking boots and walk out the front door and keep walking,” said Ann. “And we couldn't have found a more perfect place. We stood on the land on which we would eventually build our home, and knew right then and there that's where we wanted to be.”

The Costellos took an interest in Foothills Conservancy as soon as they moved to the area and attended several outings and hikes. Ann also started volunteering with the Mountains to Sea Trail group, where she learned a great deal about the extensive network of public trails in Western North Carolina and how to maintain those trails.

Ann enjoys hiking and biking, especially on lands that Foothills Conservancy has worked to protect for public access, including the Overmountain National Historic Victory Trail and the Fonta Flora State Trail. She is also passionate about horseback riding and frequents Risin' B Ranch in Morganton.

The Costello's two sons and their families live in the D.C. area — in

Lucky Number Seven

New staff member: Brittany Watkins

This year, Foothills Conservancy's staff grew from six to seven. After a yearlong service program with AmeriCorps Project Conserve, Brittany Watkins has joined the Foothills team in a brand-new position, as the special projects coordinator. Along with continuing to maintain the volunteer program that she built as an AmeriCorps member, Brittany has taken on an assortment of new responsibilities in her full-time position.

Growing up in Lenoir, North Carolina, Brittany fondly remembers discovering nature as a child during trips to Wilson Creek, Linville Gorge and the Blue Ridge Parkway. In 2015, she joined the N.C. Youth Conservation Corps, where she helped restore the Upper Thunderhole/China Creek trail in Blowing Rock. The following year, Brittany graduated from the University of North Carolina Asheville, where she studied environmental science, working weekly in the campus gardens and assisting with tree inventory for the school's urban forest. After studying horticulture and landscaping in Jackson Hole, Wyoming for six months, Brittany found she couldn't stay away from the Appalachians, returning in 2018 to begin her AmeriCorps term of service with Foothills Conservancy.

Before Brittany came on board, usually one stewardship project was completed at a time. Now, trail maintenance and tree planting can happen simultaneously.

Her involvement in the stewardship process has already had a significant impact on the land trust's capacity. As special projects coordinator, Brittany assists Stewardship Director Ryan Sparks with conservation easement monitoring and preserve management.

Another component of Brittany's position is communications and outreach, planning community meetings and giving informative presentations to spread knowledge and public awareness about the ways that land trust work impacts us all. A new endeavor, the Community Engagement Committee, will be headed by Brittany.

Brittany has made incredible strides during her time with the conservancy. One of her greatest accomplishments has been her work on the Rock Creek Trail, which will allow public access to Foothills' property for the very first

time. (Read more about the Rock Creek Trail on Page 26). Thanks to Brittany and her motivated crew of volunteers, the previously primitive property now features a stone staircase at the beginning of the trail and a handcrafted bench at the peak, giving visitors a chance to relax as they take in the sweeping view of the South Mountains. The group also cleared away trash and debris, established clear hiking trails from existing logging roads and installed water diversions.

“I'm delighted that I get to continue what I started at Foothills with the volunteers that I've gotten to know during my time as an AmeriCorps member,” Brittany said. “This new position has been a wonderful learning opportunity, and I am so grateful to the staff for helping me transition into this role.”

Ask anyone at Foothills, and they will tell you that having Brittany for only a year was not long enough. Staff members, Foothills Conservancy's board of directors and volunteers all look forward to celebrating more successes with her as the special projects coordinator.



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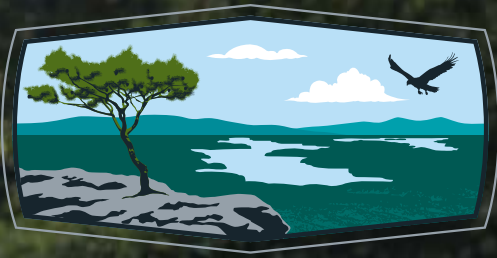
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 Mae Parker Boles
 Roby & Julie Braswell
 Mark & Sandy Hudson
 Margaret Lamere
 Michael "Squeak" & Connie Smith
 Richard & Catherine Turner

IN HONOR OF (Cont.)

Judith Hobbs	Martha Whitfield
Erma Deen Hoyle	Staff of South Mountains State Park
Deborah Davis	Tom & Jayne Davis
James & Nancy Harris Grant	
& Alice Ayers Andy & Jan Krouskop,	
Steve & Janie Matthews	Tom Coffey

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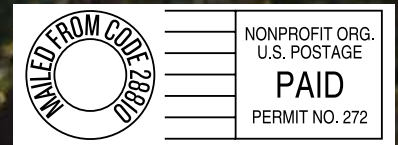
OF NORTH CAROLINA

P.O. Box 2023
Morganton, N.C. 28680

Protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the Blue Ridge Mountains and foothills in Western North Carolina by conserving scenic and recreational landscapes, productive farms and forests, healthy watersheds, rich biodiversity, and vital wildlife habitat



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The staff at Foothills Conservancy would like to thank the hundreds of dedicated volunteers and donors who, for more than 20 years, have championed the mission of our organization. We couldn't be more grateful for your support as we continue our work, conserving the land, water and cultural heritage of these foothills.

Left to right:

Beth Willard-Patton,
Tom Kenney, Brittany Watkins,
Isaac Crouch, Andrew Kota,
Ryan Sparks, Sophie Shelton