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York County group dedicates land on Earth Day

BY JIE JENNY ZOU

jzou@heraldonline.com April 22, 2014 Updated 3 hours ago



SHARON — An offshoot of York County's planning department celebrated Earth Day on Tuesday with a dedication of its latest preservation efforts — nearly 300 wooded acres in rural Sharon that's home to wild turkeys and other fauna.

The parcel is managed by the state Department of Natural Resources and is open for hunting, fishing and other public recreation.

But the dedication also served as a bittersweet reminder of the county's declining support for a group created 16 years ago with the goal of counteracting rapid development.

The 282-acre North Burris Road property was acquired for less than \$544,000, or nearly \$2,000 an acre last year by York County Forever, which protects "natural, cultural, historic and environmental resources," according to its webpage.

"This is a wonderful program," said York County Councilman Joe Cox, adding that it has become "stagnant" in the last several years because of decreased council funding. Council members, Cox said, were "irritated" with the commission.

The western York County area, represented by Cox in District 3, accounts for more than 80 percent of all York County Forever land conservations. To date, no land has been conserved in Districts 1, 6, or 7 — which includes Fort Mill, Tega Cay and Rock Hill.

Cox said that has partly contributed to the lukewarm reception the program has received by council members over the years.

York County Forever was founded in 1998 by county ordinance to conserve an acre of land for every acre developed, but it was last funded by the council in 2009.

It currently has \$1.6 million remaining in rollover funds — a far cry from a previous council promise to allocate \$1 million annually for preservation efforts.



Members of the York County Forever board and the S.C. Department of Natural Resources attend the dedication for a site in Sharon on Tuesday. **JIE JENNY ZOU** — jzou@heraldonline.com



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Members of the Nation Ford Land Trust, which partners with York County Forever on land deals, were present at the dedication along with the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Upon York County Forever's 10-year anniversary in 2008, members set an ambitious goal of preserving 10,000 acres by 2010.

So far, the group has conserved just shy of 9,100 acres, but the vast bulk of deals took place before 2008. In 2009, the group finalized two deals for a total of less than 100 acres, and the North Burris tract last year.

A larger 323-acre parcel further down the road was acquired in 2004 at less than \$171,000.

In 2010, former County Manager Jim Baker advised the council against funding York County Forever because of budget cuts. Former councilman Buddy Motz defended the agency's importance, but added that "it's something we're not going to be able to fund."

At that time, York County Forever had \$3 million in funding, which it has continued to spend down. A vacancy on its nine-member board has remained open since 2012, but on Monday, the council approved nominations to fill two slots.

Discussions to have the agency collaborate with other offices to set up a county "mitigation bank" – which would preserve land to offset environmental damages from county road projects – began stirring last winter.

"If we can tie all that together, I have better foresight in funding YCF," said Cox.

"We still have some money," said board member Leigh Van Blarcom. "We're like a squirrel with its nuts." Van Blarcom said it took two years of work to seal the North Burris deal.

Van Blarcom thinks the mitigation bank is not a "will we, but when."

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