

New county proposal to increase funding for land conservation

Your Turn

Robert Turner Guest columnist

Agriculture and related businesses are worth more than \$68 billion dollars annually to the North Carolina economy, which makes it the #1 industry in our state. But according to American Farmland Trust (AFT), North Carolina now leads the nation in the loss of farmland.

Most of that farmland loss is due to development, and this is particularly true in high growth regions like Asheville.

The dairy business in Buncombe County is a good example of how farming has been impacted in our region over the past few decades. There was at one time hundreds of dairy farms spread out across Buncombe County—now there's only two. And in the 1950's there were 22 milk-bottling plants in Western North Carolina. Now there's only one large milk bottling company left in the entire region, called Milkco, located in West Asheville.

While consolidation in the dairy business played a hand, the hard truth is that the land has become too valuable for cows to live on.

Development pressure is making it difficult for young farmers to purchase farmland at prices that they can afford. The cost of farmland is directly related to the profitability of a farm operation, and rising land prices create a huge barrier to entry into the farming business.

No Farms, No Food

Asheville brands itself as a “foodtopia,” and local food from local farms are good business for our restaurants and grocers. The popularity of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs shows that residents here still consider local food important.

It would be prudent behavior to protect the local food supply chain, and Commissioner Terry Wells new proposal to the county Board of Commissioners can help to do that, as well as protect some of the biodiversity and natural ecosystems of the region.

At a February 16 briefing before the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners, Commissioner Terri Wells made a proposal to increase funding for land conservation in the county from the current \$240,000 to \$750,000 per year.

Because Buncombe county is experiencing significant development pressure, Ms. Wells believes that it's important to do more to protect some of the region's natural resources, habitat and biodiversity, and our most productive farmland soils.

The money from the county conservation fund is used primarily to help pay for transaction costs, including surveys and attorney's fees, when a landowner voluntarily places a land conservation easement on his or her land. The conservation easement prohibits future development on the land in perpetuity, while protecting and preserving the lands biodiversity and natural ecosystems for future generations.

Much of the nations undisturbed natural spaces and biodiversity falls on private land. This is also true in Buncombe County. The transaction costs for surveys and legal work to conserve a parcel of land in this county averages about \$40,000.

That's a big financial burden to someone who is interested in voluntarily conserving her land, and many would agree that the county should at least help to cover those transaction costs since it helps to preserve and protect the natural beauty and biodiversity of our region, from which we all benefit.

In her presentation to the county, Commissioner Wells cited President Biden's recent “30 by 30” executive order aimed at conserving nearly one-third of the nation's land and oceans. The ambitious goal is to conserve 30% of the nation's open, natural spaces by the year 2030 as part of an effort to mitigate climate change and habitat loss.

The President's “30 by 30” target is based on scientific recommendations for addressing the rapid loss of biodiversity and what some conservation scientists have called a “sixth mass extinction” happening across the planet. They also stress the importance of using natural ecosystems to sequester carbon from the atmosphere.

Commissioner Wells believes that Buncombe County can be a leader in this effort and set an example for other counties to follow.

As a member of the Buncombe County Land Conservation Advisory Board, I urge readers to contact your county commissioners to show your support for land conservation.

You can watch the February 16 Commissioner's Briefing presentation archived on the Buncombe County Commissioners web site. The conservation easement presentation is at 1 hour 22 minutes of the video. You can also email your commissioners from the website.

Robert Turner is a writer and farmer in Arden, North Carolina, and the author of “Carrots Don't Grow on Trees: Building Sustainable and Resilient Communities.” He serves on the Buncombe County Land Conservation Advisory Board and the board for Organic Growers School. www.eatyourview.com

