

A Treasure at Risk... (continued)

Carrboro, Orange County, the University of North Carolina, and OWASA. With the exception of the county's Land Legacy program and OWASA's interest in protecting water supply reservoirs, none of these entities is in the business of land conservation. Carrboro's historical interest in parks has been more focused on relatively highly developed urban parks. The university has not presented a vision for Carolina North to date that recognizes the inherent value of the land they own for education, research, recreation, community health, or the ecological services provided. Each of these parties have a variety of other priorities, projects and responsibilities that has limited their ability to champion the issue of long term corridor protection through the creation of a park and preserve. This is understandable, as land conservation is not their primary mandate. At the State level, land along Bolin Creek has been identified as deserving protection, but no local action in support of these recommendations has occurred, or commitment to specifically protecting corridor land been made. A watershed management plan is currently being developed by the State, and will provide an important platform for land management in the watershed. Recommendations are due late this summer, and should provide insight into the relative priority of land parcels for preservation from an environmental perspective. The State's jurisdiction for land use planning is limited, so it will be up to local governments to implement the recommendations. It is likely that the plan will provide a tool to free up some state funds to assist local governments.

Some may view the concepts presented in this report to be in conflict with the Northern Transition Small Area Plan (Town of Carrboro, 1997) and other community interests. For example, the Small Area Plan includes planning for mixed-use development. Additionally, it is reasonable to support higher density development near urban centers to contain regional sprawl. Finally, placing land in conservation places restrictions on ongoing development of the area. In spite of these concerns, we believe that our proposal does not represent a change in



Natural recreation at Bolin Creek, by Dave Otto

A Treasure at Risk... (continued)

direction from the available planning platform; rather it provides additional specificity and direction to clarify how the Small Area Plan can be implemented in the upper Bolin Creek corridor. Most importantly, it ensures that our community will support the living environment that is an alternative to the elements of sprawl that we hope to avoid, and contains the “smart growth” and “walkable” elements that we all hope to achieve. We believe this vision reflects the core values of our community.

Another possible objection is that adoption of this concept will require an increase in local tax rates. We have not attempted to complete a fiscal analysis, and do not know to what extent this may be true. However, since a good deal of the land in question is not privately owned, the necessary public investment is not as large as it would be otherwise. Additionally, with the State’s Local Watershed Planning process nearing completion, a window of opportunity for obtaining financial assistance from the State is open. A final concern that some may raise is uncertainty about public support. We can confidently say, as a result of a number of public presentations and countless conversations with friends, neighbors and community members, **there is overwhelming local support for the concept presented herein!!**



Small red morning glory (above). Butterfly peas, by Dave Otto

Moving Toward a Park and Preserve

One of our primary conclusions and requests is that a collective, coordinated decision be made about how each of the four principal players, with assistance from groups like ours and the community-at-large, can work together to better plan for the future of the corridor. The most important immediate action we endorse is for these parties to collectively commit, through resolution and dedication of staff time, to the concept of an extended park and preserve (more than a greenway) along Bolin Creek. We also recommend that a committee be formed as soon as possible, and that the first task of this committee be to endorse a unified map that incorporates the best judgment of what should be preserved.

A number of additional goals will need to be defined and actions will need to be taken by all involved. Table 1 contains a summary of our recommendations which are discussed below. These recommendations represent our carefully considered views on how to act in the best interest of the Bolin Creek watershed, corridor and local community.

In addition to policy direction and development of interjurisdictional consensus and processes, additional money will be required. We recommend several directions. We fully endorse Mayor Nelson's campaign pledge to develop a bond referendum. We also would like to see a working committee formed immediately to work on potential grant applications to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund and other appropriate sources, and ask for local government participation in the application. **We specifically recommend submission of an application to the Clean Water Management Trust Fund for the December 1 deadline.**

A basic principle that can guide the proposed preservation effort is an agreement not to develop bottomlands or valley slopes in a "core park" area and ideally along as much of the corridor as possible. The Eno River Association has been guided by the goal to acquire land from "ridge top to ridge top" along the river corridor. We believe this is an excellent model which



Bolin Creek critters, by Dava Otto

Moving Toward a Park and Preserve (continued)

serves both ecological and recreational purposes. Preservation of significant acreage of hill slopes and adjacent uplands and associated ecological and recreational services is part of our vision that is absent in local ordinances, state regulations, and policies and practices of both public and private parties. We further recommend that the North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement Program support our recommendations as a logical extension of the state-sponsored Morgan/Little Creek Watershed Planning Project. In the longer term, we ask the County, Town, University, and private landowners to consider donating or selling significant acreage of the most valuable bottomlands, valley slopes, and adjacent upland habitats into permanent conservation.

As the highest geographic near-term priority, we ask that attention be focused on what we define as the “core park” area between Estes Drive and Homestead Road. The Carolina North project deserves special mention because of its scope. We are encouraged that the university has indicated a willingness to consider preservation of stream buffers, and has not proposed developing any land immediately adjacent to Bolin Creek. The university has not yet, however, committed to long-term land conservation –i.e., preservation in perpetuity, nor is it clear if UNC is considering more than the minimum required by current state regulations. It is also unclear if the university is willing to embrace the results of the watershed study commissioned by the Ecosystem Enhancement Program or other critical reference documents including the Orange County Natural Areas Inventory, the NC Gap Analysis project, and the Landscape for Wildlife in Orange County study. The university’s commitment to the use of the Bolin Creek corridor for ecological research and education and the university’s response to conservation requests by the Friends of Bolin Creek



²On a May 5 presentation to the Chapel Hill Council, Tony Waldrop asserted that UNC was studying possible boundaries for conservation land to recommend to the Council of State.

Mike Nelson on Bolin Creek

“Carrboro's most precious natural resource, the Bolin Creek corridor, also reflects our community, who we are, and why we live here. It is our soul. Carrboro has withstood the tidal wave of sprawl that's taking over America. Preservation of this corridor has us very worried. Skyrocketing land prices are tempting landowners to sell their property to the highest bidders. It's highly susceptible to development. We risk losing this treasure if we don't strategize together to preserve it for many generations.

Since I took office as Mayor of Carrboro, we have taken significant strides to protect the creek. We can be proud of this. The Board of Aldermen and I have adopted policies intended to preserve more open space in Carrboro in the past five years than ever before. We've passed the strongest environmental and anti-sprawl ordinances in the state. We've ordained a 40% open space requirement, making sure that developers will set aside at least that amount land wherever they build—not only along Bolin Creek. We held firm with the University with regard to its plans for the Horace Williams tract through which Bolin Creek flows, and they revised their plan to move development very far from the creek. We're still pressing UNC to set this acreage aside permanently in a land trust or conservancy.

Now I propose that we initiate a Five-year plan to protect the Bolin Creek corridor, from the Chapel Hill border to the rural buffer. This plan would be approved by the Board of Aldermen, with input from our Environmental Advisory Board and our citizens. By taking the reins of our own destiny, we can keep the Bolin Creek corridor out of danger.

As I see it, this plan should include:

- ◆ seeking funds to buy and preserve available land along the Creek corridor
- ◆ seeking conservation easements from private property owners along the Creek
- ◆ supporting the Fall (2003) referendum for county bond money for Greenway acquisition
- ◆ working with non-profit organizations like the Triangle



- ◆ Land Conservancy to purchase large tracts along the creek
- ◆ enforcing Carrboro's 40% open space requirement to protect the creek from development
- ◆ preparing to pursue our own bond referendum to preserve open space

Within five years, Bolin Creek should be protected in perpetuity for the enjoyment of our children and our children's children. I am committed to doubling our efforts toward this goal. At the heart and soul of managed growth is a community that can't stand to see its green places and open spaces taken away. Connected neighborhoods house connected neighbors, and our shared devotion to Bolin Creek can bring us together in ways that will make our community even stronger.... I feel certain that the citizens of Carrboro and our elected officials will succeed in preserving the Bolin Creek corridor by acting quickly, forcefully, and harmoniously.”

The committee to re-elect Mike Nelson, <http://electmiknelson.com/heart&soul.html>, fall 2003.

Moving Toward a Park and Preserve (continued)

and the Town of Carrboro remain to be determined. We would like to see the university designate much of the land west of Seawall School Road as a permanent biological reserve similar to the North Carolina Botanical Garden and the Mason Farm Biological Preserve. We also have a specific concern about a proposed new road along the creek. Considering that this portion may not be developed for many decades, it is prudent to consider the future of transportation paradigms rather than the current one, and to guide transportation plans in concert with this vision. We are very concerned about the potential for such a road to compromise the integrity of the Bolin Creek corridor.

Preservation of additional areas in the watershed's headwaters is also important for this vision and for implementing the forthcoming local watershed plan. A number of initiatives could be pursued here. For example, Duke University and private landowners could be approached to see if they would be willing to sell or donate land or easements. Some portion of currently unsewered areas could be designated by government and town as permanently unsewered—e. g., west of Old 86 and in the Jones Creek drainage. The county could agree to develop the future park without extending a sewer line. Overlay zoning could similarly be used to limit development density in some portions of the upper watershed.

A key component in developing this vision will be setting in place the institutional processes to see it through. The County has proposed a possible process for creation of a Bolin Creek Corridor Master Plan that we strongly endorse:

- ◆ Appointment of a Master Plan Committee from existing Town, County, and UNC committees and including representatives from the Friends of Bolin Creek and Triangle Land Conservancy;
- ◆ Evaluation by the County and Towns as to whether existing staff could provide necessary support to the project. *(FoBC greatly appreciates the time that staff have provided to date. We believe that staff commitment and efforts will be critical to the ongoing process.)*

- ◆ Development of a project timeline and mission/charge *(FoBC hopes that this document will in large part serve this purpose).*

In addition, FoBC would like to see the principals agree to contact and work with private landowners to pursue conservation land planning. It is essential to start this process as soon as possible because it is difficult to reverse development plans once they gain momentum. In this regard, we greatly appreciate the efforts of the Town of Carrboro and Orange County to acquire the historically and ecologically valuable Adam's Tract.

We have been promoting the concept of a park and preserve along Bolin Creek for several years. As this idea gains momentum, we will all need to think carefully about the details of design and implementation. Issues such as where and how people will gain access to conservation lands, trail and facility specifications, use regulations and requirements, management responsibilities, and legal and financial aspects will all warrant careful consideration. We therefore recommend that, as part of conservation, greenway, and transportation planning, the principals enlist landscape, transportation, and recreation planners, architects and engineers, with input from ecologists, to design the major intersections between the future greenway, roads, and potential rail lines as well as the trail/greenway system itself. We particularly encourage the University to seek input from ecologists and expert land planners with ecological credentials as the Carolina North project continues in its evolution. It will be important to consider major nodes and points of access as part of this process. Some of the important design considerations will include determining specific uses of different sections, handicapped accessibility, foot and bicycle flow, including major road intersections, and minimizing water, noise, and light pollution.

Table 1: Summary of Friends of Bolin Recommendations and Implementation Plan

Goal	Action	Notes	Timeframe
1. Develop policy to endorse concept and guide creation of park and preserve	Adopt resolution (appointed officials)	Carrboro, Orange County, UNC	Immediately
2. Identify roles and dedicate staff time	Create working committee	Town and county planning staff, advisory boards, TLC, FoBC	Early fall 2004
3. Prioritize parcels for consideration	Create map of parcels to consider	Working committee to review Local Watershed Plan	Early fall 2004
4. Identify permanently unsewered areas	Develop necessary planning vehicles to exclude OWASA water and sewer service in selected headwaters areas	Consider overlay zoning, MOA	Fall 2004
5. Pursue campaign in “core park” area	University to dedicate land from Carolina North	University to consider recommendations from State EEP, NHP, faculty, as well as local committees	Near term
	Seek closure on Adams Tract negotiations		As soon as possible
	Pursue easement/acquisition of P.H. Craig property	CWMTF candidate?	Near term
6. Further engage general public	Plan and hold facilitated forum to formally solicit public input	Present concept. Ask for input on: dedication of local funds (bond); priority areas/parcels; landowners desires for water/sewer service	Late fall 2004
7. Pursue conservation campaign in	Contact landowners individually to seek	Based on results of committee work and public forum	Over time
8. Finance campaign	Prepare for and place bond referendum on ballot	Pending results of public forum	Fall 2005
	Develop grant to CWMTF	Requires landowner interest	Deadline:
	Identify other grant/ funding	Consider local campaign as part of financial planning	Ongoing
9. Plan and design park and preserve details	Coordinate with greenway and transportation projects, Carolina North, and new development plans	Staff, with oversight from committee and with outside expertise as needed	Design document: 2005 Other documents on project basis

CWMTF: Clean Water Management Trust Fund; EEP: Ecosystem Enhancement Program; FoBC Friends of Bolin Creek; MOA: Memorandum of Agreement; NHP: Natural Heritage Program; TLC: Triangle Land Conservancy.

Concluding Remarks

As Mayor Nelson has said many times, Bolin Creek is the heart and soul of Carrboro. It is also the heart and soul of Southern Orange County. The Bolin Creek Corridor and adjacent lands, primarily in the upper sections, constitute an extensive natural resource and treasure that remains remarkably intact. The creek corridor between Estes Drive and Homestead Road in Carrboro doesn't appear as a park on any map, yet it is one of the most extensively used natural areas in southern Orange County for hiking, biking, jogging, nature study and escape from the pressures of work, home and urban life. It is also a miniature wildlife preserve smack in the center of one of the fastest growing regions of North Carolina. On any day of the year one can hear the plaintive voice of the barred owl chatting nearby and it is not uncommon to see the owls swooping through the trees or diving low to introduce themselves to those who venture into their world.

The Upper Bolin Creek Corridor is a natural paradise that is currently available to all for physical and spiritual renewal. It is also a treasure that has been impacted by recent development, and remains at considerable risk from development planned in the future. We are incredibly fortunate that so much of the corridor still remains intact, but precious little of this valuable resource has yet been preserved or protected in any permanent manner. The window of history is briefly open, affording us the unique opportunity to take action to preserve as much of the corridor and adjacent forest land as possible. It is our responsibility to take action today to preserve this treasure for future generations to cherish, so they can learn about the miracles of nature and experience the incredible beauty of Catesby's trillium and dwarf crested iris in spring, the spectacular crimson blossom of the cardinal flower, the intricate wonder of the passion flower in the sweltering depth of summer, the brilliant symphony of autumn foliage and the delicate artistry of a winter snow or ice storm along the creek. This opportunity is our gift today and our responsibility to preserve for tomorrow.



Cardinal flower



Catesby's trillium



All by Dave Otto

Tickweed sunflower



Passion flower

Concluding Remarks (continued)

This document provides a plan and list of suggested actions for local governments, for the University of North Carolina and for local citizens to take in order to create a Bolin Creek Park and Preserve. The Friends of Bolin Creek humbly offer this plan to facilitate the process of establishing the proposed park and preserve. We realize that many hands and minds and institutions must join and commit to this process to make it a reality. Our group is passionately dedicated to the preservation of the Bolin Creek Corridor and adjacent forest lands and we will freely commit our time and talents to achieve this goal. We invite and urge the Towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro, Orange County, the University of North Carolina, OWASA and concerned citizens to join us in preserving this natural treasure for future generations!

References and Related Reading

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