

Partnering to Protect Open Space: The Little River Regional Park

The recent two-county acquisition of a 391-acre tract for the new park will help preserve the valuable wildlife habitat and movement corridor along the North Fork of the Little River in northern Orange and Durham counties. The *Little River Regional Park and Natural Area* is the first cooperative effort of Orange and Durham counties to jointly acquire and manage an important natural area, and exemplifies the type of regional initiative encouraged in the Triangle region to address growth and quality-of-life issues. This regional value is further illustrated by counties' partnership with the Eno River Association and the Triangle Land Conservancy, without whose participation the project would have happened.

The evolution of the park

During the Summer of 1999, a multi-government organization formed to manage the disposal of waste generated in the Town of Chapel Hill, Town of Carrboro and Orange County identified a site in the northeastern section of Orange County for a landfill for construction and demolition materials. The site was located near the Orange County border with Durham County, and adjacent to the North Fork of the Little River. Many neighbors protested the notion of locating such a facility at this location. Fortunately, the Orange County board of commissioners that Fall decided against locating landfill at this site.

The landfill proposal, however, focused some attention on one of only two remaining areas along the river where the opportunity still exists to protect a large area of ecologically significant upland habitat. Durham County and the Triangle Land Conservancy raised the possibility of protecting two adjacent properties (568 acres) for a

joint county park. The Eno River Association also supported the idea and then Orange County agreed to participate in the park project. The four entities formed a partnership to pursue acquisition of the 391-acre “Newton tract” for a low-impact park. The adjacent “Cavin tract” (the former landfill site) was purchased by a group of area landowners and was no longer for sale.

Over the next several months, the partners negotiated for the purchase of the Newton tract from the Triangle Community Foundation. The property had been donated to the Foundation by George Newton of Durham for philanthropic purposes. An option agreement was signed in May 2000 allowing the partners to work on securing funding for acquiring the site. Durham and Orange counties applied jointly for state grant funds. The Triangle Land Conservancy and Eno River Association decided to raise \$180,000 in private funds with a joint fundraising campaign.

The two counties were awarded two state grant funds for parkland acquisition: \$377,000 from NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund and \$250,000 from NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. NC Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, Bill Holman, said “This project exemplifies the types of regional initiatives we need to encourage across our state as we continue to foster ‘Smart Growth’ and the preservation of our outstanding quality of life.

The counties signed binding purchase agreements to purchase the park property in two phases. Most of the parkland was purchased in November 2000; the remaining portion in July 2001. Orange and Durham counties also applied for and received \$262,000 from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The grant will provide funds for the park development, with some of the facilities to include a parking

area, bathrooms, picnic shelter, playground, interpretive signs and trail improvements. The project partners formed an advisory committee to help determine what uses will be allowed in the park and how to design park facilities to take advantage of site features and to avoid the more sensitive areas. An archaeological survey of the entire property will contribute to the information base for the property.

Source of Funds	Amount
Durham County	\$179,000
Orange County	\$96,000
Triangle Land Conservancy and Eno River Association	\$170,000
NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund	\$365,000
NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund	\$250,000
US Land and Water Conservation Fund	\$262,000
Total	\$1,322,000

Property Description

The Little River Regional Park straddles the Orange/Durham county boundary with 256 acres in Durham and 135 acres in Orange. The surrounding lands are a combination of woodlands and low-density residential development. The property boundary includes over one mile of frontage along the North Fork of the Little River and is located five miles upstream from the Little River Reservoir, which supplies drinking water to Durham.

The park property was once owned by Continental Can Company, which clear-cut the site in the 1960s and replanted with loblolly pine. Several of the old logging roads remain today, and are used as walking trails. Today the site is typical of a Piedmont loblolly forest in transition to an upland oak-hickory forest, which should predominate within the next 100 years. Wildlife known to use the property includes deer, wild turkey, beaver, otter, weasel, salamanders and numerous migratory birds.

Conservation easements will protect 300-foot riparian buffers within the park. That protection will help ensure the continued excellent health of these waters and protect aquatic species in the Little River. The river is home to five rare freshwater mussels, four of which are listed by the state as “threatened” (yellow lampmussel, Atlantic pigtoe, triangle floater, and squawfoot).

Benefits of the Park

The Little River Regional Park and Natural Area will give Triangle residents a scenic, ecologically important area that allows them the opportunity to enjoy nature and to participate in low-impact recreation activities. The park will also help to maintain high water quality for both the rare aquatic animal species and for the Durham drinking water supplies. Finally, the park will provide a fine example of regional cooperation to protect an important upland wildlife habitat in an area that is rapidly losing its open space.