

# Orange County Lands Legacy Program

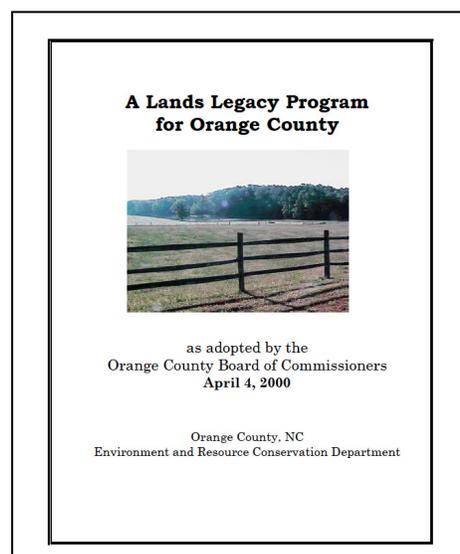
## *A Ten-Year Retrospective*

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for the ***Lands Legacy Program***. The program was adopted in 2000 with a truly ambitious mission: to work with willing landowners and conservation partners to protect Orange County's most important natural and cultural resource lands before they are severely damaged or destroyed. This anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the program's successes, and to assess how it might adapt to changing conditions.

### ***It was started ten years ago***

In 1999, while the world was counting down to the start of a new millennium, Orange County was developing an ambitious new program to help counter some alarming trends. While population growth, residential development, and land prices were rising steadily, the availability of parks and recreation facilities, farmland, prime forestland were declining. The county lost important natural and cultural heritage sites to land-use conversions.

Although there had been excellent work by local land trusts and others to conserve special places like Duke Forest and Eno River State Park, and to protect water supplies at Cane Creek and University Lake, the rising tide of development was threatening to overwhelm those efforts. The Orange County Board of Commissioners decided to become a more active partner in conserving lands that help give the county its identity, places that would be sorely missed if they were erased from the landscape due to changes in land use. The board adopted the Lands Legacy program in April 2000.



### ***How has Lands Legacy worked thus far?***

Through Lands Legacy, the County has completed projects in all seven townships. That success is due in part to many partners, including dozens of landowners interested in conserving their land through various means, including the granting of conservation easements. Other key partners included Triangle Land Conservancy, Eno River Association, OWASA, Duke University, and other local governments. The County also partnered with state and federal agencies that awarded over \$5 million in grants for park acquisition/construction and for conserving farms and open space.

### **A Case Study in Partnership: New Hope Preserve**

***Orange County joined several partners in completing an important section of the New Hope Corridor Master Plan. The County, in collaboration with Triangle Land Conservancy, Durham County, Town of Chapel Hill, and Durham City, has assembled several land parcels for the New Hope Preserve, which will preserve open space between Duke Forest and Jordan Lake. The partners adopted a joint master plan for the Hollow Rock Access Area—a future 75-acre park located at the intersection of Erwin and Pickett roads. Further collaboration is underway for park construction and operation.***



Over the first 10 years of Lands Legacy, Orange County acquired land for seven new parks, preserved all or portions of 12 active farms (1,275 acres), and conserved 540 acres of natural open space in the Eno River, Cane Creek, Little River, and New Hope Creek watersheds upstream of public water supply intakes. In all cases, projects were chosen to address multiple public interests. A list of completed projects is attached.

### ***An evolving focus for the program***

During the first few years of the program, Lands Legacy focused on parkland acquisition to address the County’s shortage of public parks, a finding of the 1999 Joint Master Recreation and Parks report. The County (for the first time) applied for State conservation trust funds and was awarded grants for parkland acquisition. The program then shifted its focus to farmland preservation, responding to farmer interests and federal matching funds for purchasing conservation easements. Through Lands Legacy, 9 farms granted easements that guarantee over 1,200 acres of prime farmland will remain available for agricultural use. Easements on two other farms (320 acres) will be completed in FY 2010-11.

More recently, the program has worked to conserve open space and greenway trail corridors along rivers and streams—thereby helping to protect our public water supplies and securing new areas for low-impact recreation. That shift in emphasis helps to implement the BOCC’s 2009 priority goal of protecting significant natural areas and wildlife habitat. The current economic downturn has also enabled staff slow down acquisition to focus on the stewardship of the properties acquired over the past decade, and in doing so, to help “recalibrate” the goals and objectives of the program.

### ***Why is it still important to conserve land?***

Through Lands Legacy, Orange County has made long-term investments in preserving its precious natural and cultural heritage—part of the county’s foundation for future economic development and quality of life. With the Triangle Region expecting another 900,000 residents by 2020<sup>1</sup>, and two interstate highways running through the county’s



midsection, the protection of these assets will reap countless benefits in the future. Those assets

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<sup>1</sup> By 2020 the Triangle Region’s population is expected to increase from the current 1.5 million to 2.4 million people (Source: Research Triangle Regional Partnership, 2010)

include our “green infrastructure”—a web of natural green space, vital for wildlife corridors, recreational trails, and protecting the many rivers and streams that supply our drinking water.

Another critical part of that resource base is the county’s prime farmland used to produce agricultural goods and services. Lands Legacy has responded to the agricultural community’s interest in preserving farmland, and in doing so, helping to recapitalize participating farms with an infusion of funds and an opportunity to diversify their products to meet the demands of the strong *local food* movement—all without reducing the local tax base<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, many important historic and archaeological sites, part of our cultural heritage that contributes to tourism, are being lost due to lack of information and adequate safeguards, and over 40 percent of the County’s most important natural heritage areas remain unprotected.

### ***The cost of conservation***

Orange County’s land conservation over the past 10 years has cost the County \$3,980 per acre—less than 1% of the County’s budget over that same period. Those funds went toward the direct conservation of 2,547 acres by the County and an additional 1,453 acres by the State for Eno River State Park (2003) and for the Durham County portion of Little River Park.



Over time the price of land has risen steadily in this region, and after the current slow down prices will rise again. Some of the land the County purchased through Lands Legacy is being “land banked” for future parks. In the meantime, much of that land remains in use for agricultural production through temporary arrangements with nearby farmers.

### ***Part of a state and regional effort to protect vital resources***

Lands Legacy is part of a statewide effort to identify the most important resource lands and to distinguish them from areas more suitable for future development. Orange County was an active participant in formulating the **Triangle Greenprint** and **One NC Naturally**. We are also working with neighboring jurisdictions to extend the **NC Mountains-to-Sea Trail** through the central Piedmont. Similar efforts are going on in Durham and Wake counties, and Chatham County is currently developing a countywide conservation plan.

### ***An award winning program***

Lands Legacy has been recognized for its achievements. In 2007 Orange County received the ***Excellence in County Planning Award*** from the National Association of County Planners. The program was twice runner-up for the national ***County Leadership in Conservation Award*** by the National Association of Counties and Trust for Public Land. In 2003 the Conservation Trust for NC recognized Orange and Durham counties with the ***Government Partner Conservation Award*** for their joint establishment of Little River Regional Park. And finally, the NC Soil and Water Conservation Society awarded the ***Local Government Conservationist Award*** in 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> Local property taxes were unaffected because the farms were already enrolled in the present use value program; more than half of the funds used to purchase easements were from state/federal grants and landowner donations.