

Lands Legacy Program

Action Plan 2014-2017

(For the period July 1, 2014 – June 30, 2017)



Morgan Creek headwaters near Pickards Mountain

**Orange County Department of
Environment, Agriculture, Parks and Recreation**

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Introduction

The purpose of Orange County's **Lands Legacy Program** is to help protect the county's most important natural and cultural resource lands before they are damaged or lost to incompatible land-uses activities. Much has been accomplished by the County and its many partners, but there are still many special places needing some level of protection.

Lands Legacy works with landowners who are interested in conserving their land. All projects are voluntary. Some properties are purchased outright to serve a specific public purpose, such as for a park or nature preserve, consistent with adopted county plans. Most properties protected through the program are accomplished with a conservation easement-- a permanent, legal agreement between the County and the landowner, whereby the land remains in private ownership. To qualify for a conservation easement the property must have special "conservation values," the protection of which will provide meaningful and lasting public benefit (e.g., water supply watershed, prime farmland, natural heritage area, historic or cultural site). In most cases the property possesses multiple conservation values.

Most projects completed through Lands Legacy are in partnership with other organizations, such as Eno River Association, Triangle Land Conservancy, Orange Water and Sewer Authority, Duke University, and other local governments. The County often uses state and federal matching grant funds to acquire land or to construct facilities.

The Lands Legacy Program is guided by a three-year **Action Plan** that sets priorities for determining what projects to work on over the specified timeframe. The Lands Legacy Action Plan is prepared the DEAPR staff and adopted by the Board of Commissioners. Some projects are long-term efforts that span multiple action plans.

The process of developing the Action Plan begins with staff identifying potential projects and asking the Board for initial guidance. Staff then meets with advisory boards for their input on development of priorities for the upcoming years. Some of that discussion with advisory boards is still ongoing through the end of November.

Staff prepares a draft Plan and presents it to the Board of Commissioners for their consideration and feedback. The Action Plan is then finalized for Board approval prior to adoption of the County's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).

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The following is the Action Plan is for the upcoming three fiscal years: 2014-15 to 2016-17. Like the previous action plan, this one focuses on fewer target areas. The reason for limiting the scope of projects is allow staff to complete one or more of the larger, multi-year priority projects. Staff is also adjusting to the reduced availability of state grant funds to local governments and the recent elimination of the NC Conservation Tax Credit. The scaled-back plan will continue also enable the staff to tend to its land stewardship responsibilities of properties "land-banked" for future parks and preserves.

The Action Plan includes current goals and a priority list of land conservation projects for the coming three years, followed by a summary of advisory board comments, and specific acquisition objectives. Also attached is a brief summary of the projects completed through Lands Legacy over its first 12 years (2000-2012)

Overarching Objectives for 2014 - 2017

1. **Previously-Approved Projects:** Complete projects that were approved by the Board of Commissioners during the previous planning period, but have not yet closed. These include acquisitions that received final Board approval and other projects that are still being negotiated but have not received final approval for close out.
2. **Site Stewardship:** Make sure all properties have boundaries marked in accordance with the Department's land management policy. Complete management plans for all properties "land banked" for future public parks and preserves.
3. **Natural Heritage Areas:** Protect high-priority natural heritage areas contiguous with existing conservation lands, allowing low-impact recreation where suitable.
4. **Joint Town/County Open Space:** Continue collaborating with the towns and other entities in acquiring land for establishing or expanding public trails or greenways identified in town plans that tie together important county-wide open spaces.
5. **Grant Funds:** Continue to pursue state and federal grants to leverage existing County funds authorized for land acquisition, site stewardship, or park development.

Summary List of Priority Projects

The following areas are considered as higher priority locations for completing conservation projects through the Lands Legacy Program. Details for each project are provided in the table below (Pages 3-4).

DEAPR staff recognizes, once again, all of these projects cannot be completed during the three-year timeframe for this Action Plan. Nevertheless, all are priorities and progress can be made in moving each of these projects forward. Completion of active projects and stewardship of existing properties remain overarching priorities.

1. **Future Bingham Township Park**
2. **Upper Eno Preserve/Mountains-to-Sea Trail**
(Hillsborough to Seven-Mile Creek segment)
2. **Farmland Easements**
3. **Jordan Lake Headwaters Preserve**
5. **Historic Landmarks (and historic easements)**

Priority List for July 2014-June 2017

Priority Need	Purpose/Use	Estimated Cost*	Timetable
<p>1. Bingham Township Park Pursue acquisition of park site in Bingham Township.</p>	<p>Purchase new district park site (25-74 acres) for active and low-impact recreation consistent with County’s park master plan.</p>	<p>\$600,000 from Lands Legacy Fund for acquisition costs depending on potential collaboration with OWASA</p>	<p>Identify priority sites (ongoing); negotiate acquisition of future park site for closing by December 2014.</p>
<p>2. Upper Eno Preserve/ Mountains-to-Sea Trail Acquire/protect additional priority lands for riparian buffers and for the Seven Mile Creek component and for trail link to Hillsborough Riverwalk (future Mountains-to-Sea Trail).</p>	<p>Preserve one the County’s largest intact natural areas for a planned nature preserve with trails, outdoor education, and campsite. Partner with Eno River Association; coordinate MST with NC Parks and Friends of Mountain-to-Sea Trail.</p>	<p>Total \$1.5 to \$2.0 million, depending on total acres and acquisition method. County share (~33%) from the Lands Legacy Fund and Conservation Easement Fund. Pursue grants from State and others.</p>	<p>Contact key landowners and perform site recon in 2014-15. Collaborate with partners in acquiring lands as feasible in 2015-17. Pursue grant and partner funding. This continues multi-year initiative.</p>
<p>3. Farmland Easements Acquire farmland conservation easements in priority water supply watersheds (Cane Creek, Upper Eno, Back Creek, and University Lake).</p>	<p>Maintain a critical mass of active farmland and protect water quality by preserving riparian buffers on farms. Partner with Orange NRCS/ Soil & Water District and state or federal farmland grant agency.</p>	<p>\$400,000 from Lands Legacy CE Fund to be matched with potential grants from federal (FRPP) or State (ADFP) farmland grant programs.</p>	<p>Identify priority farm(s) for annual grant submittal (FRPP and ADFP Trust Fund). Negotiate easement(s) for closing by December 2016.</p>
<p>4. Jordan Lake Headwaters Preserve Expand current efforts to protect more of the Mason Farm to Jordan Lake connector and associated natural areas.</p>	<p>Protect remaining portions of an important natural corridor that links UNC lands (including Mason Farm Biological Reserve) with the New Hope game lands (Jordan Lake). Partner with UNC, Chapel Hill and the Botanical Garden Foundation.</p>	<p>Multi-year project. Potential cost-share with UNC, Chapel Hill, Botanical Garden Fdn., and NC trust funds. Total est. long-term cost of \$1.5 million. County share (~25%) from Lands Legacy Fund.</p>	<p>Continue discussions with landowners and identify willing sellers/donors by June 2015; coordinate with partners, secure grants, negotiate any closings by June 2017.</p>

* - Cost estimates are rough estimates based on expected per acreage land prices, and actual negotiations may produce different results. As acquisition opportunities are reviewed and evaluated, the cost estimates will be refined.

Priority Need	Purpose/Use	Estimated Cost*	Timetable
<p>5. Local Historic Landmarks Augment current efforts to designate local landmarks for high-priority historic sites, including sites on Study List for National Register of Historic Places.</p>	<p>Designating local historic landmarks may be more effective way of protecting high-priority historic sites, and may lead to historic preservation easements for selected properties. Partner with Historic Preservation Commission.</p>	<p>\$15,000 (\$5,000/yr) from Lands Legacy Fund matched by landowner funds for consultants to prepare landmark application for HPC/BOCC consideration. An additional \$200-300K could be needed to acquire historic preservation easement on selected properties.</p>	<p>HPC to identify priority landmarks and contact owners farm(s) for landmark consideration. Negotiate historic preservation easements when feasible.</p>
<p>Others as opportunities arise.</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Unknown</p>	<p>Unknown</p>

* - Cost estimates are rough estimates based on expected per acreage land prices, and actual negotiations may produce different results. As acquisition opportunities are reviewed and evaluated, the cost estimates will be refined.

Advisory Board Comments and Priorities

A. Commission for the Environment (CFE)

Continue efforts to protect significant natural heritage areas within the Seven Mile Creek area (e.g., Sevenmile Creek Sugar Maple Bottoms) and Jordan Lake headwaters (e.g., Mason Farm Oak-Hickory Forest); also along the upper reaches of the Eno River, New Hope Creek and Bolin Creek. All county parks and recreation facilities, including the planned Mountains-to-Sea Trail, should be designed to avoid sensitive natural areas and be constructed using environmentally friendly and sustainable methods.

B. Agricultural Preservation Board (APB)

Continue working with farms interested in protecting prime/active farmland with permanent agricultural conservation easements. Pursue state and federal grant funds to match County funds available for easement purchases.

C. Parks and Recreation Council (PRC)

Complete the acquisition of land for a future park in Bingham Township as recommended in the Master Recreation & Parks Plan. Acquire land and trail easements for an Orange County segment of the NC Mountains-to-Sea Trail, with priority for linking Hillsborough Riverwalk to the Seven Mile Creek component of the Upper Eno Preserve.

D. Historic Preservation Commission (HPC)

Continue efforts to acquire conservation easements to protect important cultural and/or archaeological resources, including the Sevenmile Creek basin (road network, associated structures), and the Hillsborough Academy. Consider allocating funds to support applications from high-priority candidates for Local Historic Landmark designation. Establish an "archaeology emergency fund" for unanticipated costs for surveying/protecting historic roadbeds and archaeological sites.

Specific Acquisition Objectives

The following are more specific acquisition objectives developed from existing plans, BOCC feedback/direction, County staff knowledge, and discussions with other conservation partners; in some cases expanding upon or refining advisory board recommendations. These are not listed in priority order.

A. Natural Areas and Wildlife Habitat

- Work with the Botanical Garden Foundation and other partners to conserve key areas and establish a Jordan Lake Headwaters Preserve, including Mason Farm Oak-Hickory Forest (natural heritage area of state significance)
- Work with the Eno River Association and others to conserve critical land for the Seven Mile Creek component of the Upper Eno Preserve, including Sevenmile Creek Sugar Maple Bottoms (natural heritage area of state significance)
- Work with the Eno River Association, the Town of Hillsborough and others to conserve priority riparian and upland habitats in the Upper Eno River critical area
- Work with Triangle Land Conservancy and others to conserve priority riparian lands and prime forest lands located in the Upper New Hope Creek watershed
- Work with the Town of Carrboro, University of NC and the Friends of Bolin Creek to identify priority lands for conserving the Upper Bolin Creek corridor

➤ *See #2 and #4 on the Priority Table (Pages 3-4)*

B. Farmland Preservation

- Continue working with the Orange NRCS/Soil and Water Conservation District to identify and prioritize willing sellers and donors of conservation easements on prime farmland in priority watersheds
- Continue working with the Orange NRCS/Soil and Water Conservation District to apply for grants from the NC Agricultural Development & Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements

➤ *See #3 on the Priority Table (Pages 3-4)*

C. Parklands and Open Space

- Acquire land for a future district park in the White Cross area (Bingham Township) consistent with the County's Master Recreation and Parks Plan
- Acquire key parcels needed for a public pedestrian trail and wildlife corridor that would connect Hillsborough Riverwalk to the Haw River for the planned NC Mountains-to-Sea Trail—focusing in short-term on the link between Occoneechee Mountain and the Seven Mile Creek component of the Upper Eno Preserve
- In all acquisitions, be cognizant of the potential for meeting other objectives of protecting riparian buffers, natural areas and historic/archaeological sites

➤ *See #1 and #2 on the Priority Table (Pages 3-4)*

D. Cultural and Archaeological Sites

- Continue working with landowners in the Faucette's Mill and Hall's Mill areas to protect the combination of historic and natural features in those communities
- Work with the owners of the former Hillsborough Academy property to protect the remains of historic and archaeological resources associated with that site
- Conduct archaeological surveys of county properties acquired for future parks and nature preserves (e.g., McGowan Creek Preserve, Seven Mile Creek Preserve, Millhouse Road Park, and Northeast Park)
- Continue to stabilize, maintain and renovate existing structures on County-owned properties acquired for future parks (e.g., Millhouse Road park site)
- Work with the HPC to pursue applications from high-priority candidates for local historic landmark designation

➤ ***See #5 on the Priority Table (Pages 3-4)***

E. Watershed Riparian Buffers

- Protect riparian corridors in the Upper Eno River protected watershed; partner with the Eno River Association and others; pursue grant funds from the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund and Upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative
- Identify and protect priority areas in Upper New Hope Creek corridor; work with New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee and Triangle Land Conservancy
- Identify priority areas for protection in the Bolin Creek corridor; collaborate with Friends of Bolin Creek, the Town of Carrboro, the University of NC, and others
- Preserve riparian buffers in other water supply watersheds through parkland acquisitions and agricultural conservation easement projects

➤ ***See #2 and #4 on the Priority Table (Pages 3-4)***

Conclusion

The first 12 years of the Lands Legacy Program saw tremendous strides in the protection of priority resource lands, with 3,077 acres permanently protected (as of December 2013) and several more projects in the works.

The FY 2014-17 Action Plan builds on projects from previous years, and includes projects in each of the Lands Legacy priority areas (natural areas, parkland, cultural/historic resources, prime farmland and riparian buffers and public water supply watersheds). This Action Plan will continue the use of 2001 Parks and Open Space bonds funds to leverage grant funds from state and federal sources for protecting high priority natural and cultural resource lands.