

Land deal helps protect lake

212-acre purchase preserves area near source of drinking water

By April Bethea

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Mecklenburg County recently purchased nearly 212 acres of land near Huntersville, the latest in efforts to help preserve property near Mountain Island Lake.

Acquiring the land – which also includes the historic 18th century Holly Bend estate – has long been a top priority for the county and other local organizations because of its proximity to the lake. Mountain Island Lake provides drinking water to almost one million people in Charlotte and surrounding communities.

But while the county had eyed the Neck Road property for more than a decade, the land didn't become available for purchase until earlier this year. It had been held in trust by the estate of L. Garner Eakes, who bought the farm land in 1970 and worked to restore the historic home.

Eakes' daughter said she's spent the past few years trying to find a way to preserve the property.

The county closed on the land deal last week. A final purchase price wasn't immediately available on Monday, but county commissioners agreed this summer to allot \$6.6 million toward the property and to designate it as a nature preserve. The money will come from the 2007 land bonds.

The new land deal helps to link the county-owned Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge and Rural Hill, providing nearly 1,200 acres of contiguous preserved land, said Michael Kirschman, division director for nature preserves and natural resources for the county's park and recreation department. It also protects nearly a mile of shoreline along the lake, he said.

Other local conservation leaders praised the land deal on Monday, saying it will help aid other efforts to protect the quality of water in Mountain Island Lake. Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy, said if land along the shore of the lake is developed, it increases the risk of contaminating the water.

Pam Beck, chair of the Mountain Island Lake Marine Commission, said conserving the land also helps to protect and promote wildlife in the area.

Holly Bend has strong ties to Mecklenburg's earliest days. The property once belonged to Robert Davidson, whose father owned the nearby Rural Hill plantation. Local historian Dan Morrill said Robert Davidson was alleged to have been the largest slave owner in the county, and the federal-style plantation house is a good example of the county's aristocratic elite. The property, which Morrill said has been well preserved, was designated an historic landmark in 1974.

The home passed through several owners over the past two centuries. Beth Martina said her father always wanted to have a farm and bought the land in 1970 after shopping other sites. The Eakes never lived in the home, though Martina said her father did go to the land often, including using it as a hunting lodge with friends and family during October to December. Other families would stay in the home over the years.

Martina said her father worked hard to help restore the property, including hiring architect and preservation historian Jack Boyte. Her father sent a carpenter to historic Williamsburg to do research for the restoration project. Eakes died in 1989 and, per his will, the land was held in trust and could not sold for 20 years.

Kirschman said county park and recreation officials plan to study how to use the Holly Bend property in the future, but said they want to make the home a public facility that can be used for tours or as a rental place. The master plan work should kick off in the coming months.

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