



FOOTHILLS CONSERVANCY
OF NORTH CAROLINA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Foothills Conservancy Secures Catawba Falls Access

MORGANTON, N.C. – Property long sought for public trail access to Catawba Falls in Pisgah National Forest above Old Fort has been acquired by Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina.

Foothills Conservancy, the land trust for the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge and foothills, moved quickly to secure a private loan to purchase the 23-acre property for \$400,000 after it was listed with a realtor for sale for \$450,000 in April.

With two years to repay the loan, the conservancy and McDowell County officials are working closely with U. S. Congressman Heath Shuler, U. S. Senators Richard Burr and Elizabeth Dole, N. C. Representative Mitch Gillespie and Senator Joe Sam Queen to seek the funds needed for the U. S. Forest Service to purchase the property, plus 65 adjacent acres along Allison Ridge also owned by the conservancy, for addition to the Pisgah National Forest.

“The conservancy went out on a limb and borrowed funds to acquire the property after reaching agreement with the heirs and sons of the landowner,” said Tom Kenney, the conservancy’s Land Protection Director. “We knew we had to act very fast. We did not want the chance to gain public access to Catawba Falls and protect its downstream waters to slip by forever.”

Foothills Conservancy does not have the resources itself to develop and manage a trail to the falls, Kenney explained, so for the time being, access will be limited to periodic scheduled, guided hikes led by the conservancy and listed on its website at www.foothillsconservancy.org. Since it may take two years to secure funds and execute a U. S. Forest Service purchase, the conservancy is exploring temporary public access options and management agreements with the Forest Service and the county that will include an evaluation of safety and management concerns.

“We are grateful that a local individual, who wishes to remain anonymous, granted us favorable terms on a two-year loan to make this possible and that the owners were willing to sell their property for conservation and public trail access instead of development,” Kenney said. “Now, we ask all who love Catawba Falls and value its scenic and natural splendor to help us raise the public and private funds needed to add this tract to Pisgah National Forest.”

“We are thrilled that Foothills Conservancy was able to acquire this property,” said Marisue Hilliard, Forest Supervisor of North Carolina’s National Forests. “The U. S. Forest Service finally has an opportunity to acquire this key tract and establish a public trail to spectacular Catawba Falls, which was added to Pisgah in the late 1980s.”

According to Hilliard, the property currently ranks as the number one priority for addition to North Carolina’s National Forests.

“Public trail access to Catawba Falls will be a great way to bolster our efforts to increase sustainable tourism and economic development capitalizing on our natural assets of McDowell County and Old Fort,” said Carol Price, Executive Director, McDowell Tourism Authority.

“Opening a public trail to the falls has long been a goal of McDowell County,” said Andy Webb, Chairman of the McDowell County Commissioners. “Now that Foothills Conservancy has control of the property, we have a chance to achieve what for years has seemed impossible. The county commissioners recently passed a resolution of support for adding this property to Pisgah National Forest, and we are eager to work with the conservancy and our representatives in Washington and Raleigh to find funds for this purpose.”

County and state officials have joined in a series of initial meetings with Congressman Shuler and his staff as well as the staff of Senators Burr and Dole to obtain their support for securing federal funds in Fiscal Year 2008. All have indicated a high interest in trying to help the U. S. Forest Service obtain funds to purchase the Catawba Falls access property as soon as possible and to develop the much desired public recreation and use.

“The best way to achieve public use and enjoyment of the Catawba Falls area is to support efforts now underway by area citizens, Old Fort and McDowell County officials, and Foothills Conservancy to raise public and private funds for the Forest Service to buy the tract,” said Susie Hamrick Jones, the conservancy’s executive director. “Area citizens can contact their elected officials to urge them to budget funds to add these lands to Pisgah and open this trail to the public and may also work with the conservancy to help us raise private funds to leverage public dollars and pay off our loan.”

Since 2005, working in partnership with the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund and private landowners, Foothills Conservancy has permanently conserved almost 1,400 acres adjacent to the recently acquired tract in the headwaters of the Catawba River. The conservancy’s efforts in the Catawba headwaters and on other important lands in McDowell County continue.

Anyone wishing to help by contacting elected officials to advocate for public funding or by making donations and helping to raise private funds can get information on Foothills Conservancy's website at www.foothillsconservancy.org or by phone at 828-437-9930, e-mail at info@foothillsconservancy.org or mail at FCNC, PO Box 3023, Morganton, NC 28680. Tax deductible donations toward the purchase of the Catawba Falls public access lands should be made directly to Foothills Conservancy and clearly earmarked for this specific purpose.