

Investing in land and water conservation is smart business

In my work on Hickory City Council and in my professional life, a central issue of mine is improving our economy. A healthy economy equals a healthy community. We work hard to attract businesses to our community. We do everything we can to grow our tax base. And we want to attract visitors to our community who will spend their dollars here. Land and water conservation is one action that contributes to growth in all three of those areas.

I recently spoke at a forum on conservation in the Foothills region, which includes Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, McDowell and Rutherford counties. The forum was sponsored by Land for Tomorrow, which is a statewide coalition that works to increase public funding for land and water conservation in North Carolina.

As a businessman, I am always interested in the bottom line. A few years ago, Land for Tomorrow commissioned a study that showed that every dollar spent on land and water conservation results in a four-dollar return on that



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investment. Investing public dollars in land and water conservation is smart business.

As I told the forum – there is lots of good data to show that land and water conservation can be an important factor in economic development.

Think about it in terms of attracting business. Today's businesses are looking to attract a young, highly skilled work force. Those employees want to live and raise their families close to natural areas – places where they can get outside. Parks, greenways and other natural areas are a business incentive.

Conserved land also boosts the value of other nearby land. Many studies have found that homes near greenway and parks have a higher tax value. Communities can also reduce their costs for public service with

conservation. Conserved lands filter runoff, reducing the cost of water treatment and storm water management.

And conserved lands attract visitors. Those visitors come for the natural attractions, but they buy gas, food and lodging in the communities that they visit. Outdoor recreation is the country's number two economic sector, only outpaced by the health care industry.

The City of Hickory has recognized the value of conservation in its Inspiring Spaces Master Plan. Land and water conservation is one of the many elements within the plan that inspire people to want to live, work and bring their business to Hickory. We believe this is particularly important to attract millennials.

Much of this land and water conservation comes about in North Carolina because of our state's three publicly funded conservation funds – the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, and the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. Since 1992, these

funds have pumped more than \$246 million into Foothills conservation. You can see the tangible results of these expenditures at places like Henry Fork Regional Recreation Area, Catawba Town Park, Jacobs Fork Park, Riverbend Park, Claremont Park and Conover City Park. As the City of Hickory and Catawba County work to inspire more businesses to relocate here, to convince more young people to raise their families here, and to invite more visitors to come enjoy their time here, we will tap these trust funds.

These trusts funds were created and supported by the N.C. General Assembly, which will begin its 2018 session in May. Over the years, our legislators on both sides of the aisle have consistently supported the trust funds. As the members of the General Assembly work on the state budget, I hope they will continue and grow that support because it is good for the state's bottom line.

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