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Amid growing rancor over development, Foothills Land Conservancy focuses on its mission

By Steve Wildsmith stevedailytimes@gmail.com
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The Foothills Land Conservancy office is on a 314-acre farm in Rockford.

Scott Keller | The Daily Times

To put into perspective just how big the area of acreage is that Blount County-based nonprofit Foothills Land Conservancy has helped preserve, consider the numbers.

The organization's website reports that over 36 years, the organization — headed by Blount native, long-time grocer and former state legislator Bill Clabough — has protected 135,000 total acres in seven states. Those numbers, however, need to be updated for 2022, Clabough told The Daily Times this week.

"It's definitely more than that," Clabough said. "We're still putting the numbers together for this year, but it will be closer to 140,000 or 145,000 acres."

To put that into perspective, the size of Blount County is 567 square miles, which translates to 362,880 acres — meaning that the Foothills Land Conservancy has helped to preserve a total tract of land almost half the size of Blount County. That's almost as big as Zion National Park in Utah (146,597 acres) and the city of Chicago (149,760 acres).

In other words, it's a lot of land, and the organization isn't done yet, Clabough said.

"We completed about 18 conservation easements (in 2021), and from a local perspective, it's one of the best years we've had in a long time," Clabough said. "We had one in Blount County, a couple in Knox County, a couple in Anderson, and one each in Sevier, Roane and Jefferson counties — and all but one were working farms, which always has a lot of significance to our local scenery and just the enjoyment of our region."

The Foothills Land Conservancy, based out of Rockford, got its start 1985 when a group of local residents, concerned about the potential impact of a 1,200-acre amusement park planned for Tuckaleechee Cove, established an organization called Alternatives for Blount County. The park never happened, but conservation issues persisted — just as they do today — and when the group disbanded that year, Foothills Land Conservancy was founded in its wake.

Blount County native and former U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander joined early on, and FLC quickly established itself as an organization dedicated to the preservation of the local rural character. In the 1990s, FLC cultivated and donated 5,800 acres to the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency in Blount County, an area that became the Foothills Wildlife Management Area, as well as 400 acres to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In 1997, the nonprofit's reach expanded to Knox County, where its work led to the creation of the Forks of the River Wildlife Management Agency.

"The way it works is that an individual landowner and Foothills Land Conservancy work together to establish a contract that spells out what can and can't happen on the property in perpetuity," said Clabough, who was named FLC's executive director in 2006. "The biggest thing they give up are the development rights — for example, sometime the property owners have a large tract of land, and they want to give some to their children and build additional houses on it.

"That's the biggest thing they give up. Now, they can build fences, repair fences, grow crops, run cattle, dig ponds — most of those all stay the same. But that contract is attached to the deed, so it goes with it forever. Now, people can still do with the property what they wish when it comes to selling it or giving it away. That option is still there. It doesn't have any effect on the ownership."

And, he added, it doesn't mean that certain tracts of land can't be seized by local, state or federal governments in the name of eminent domain. The local organization Citizens Against the Pellissippi Parkway Extension has long fought against the addition of four miles of U.S. 162 that would lengthen Pellissippi Parkway from its current terminus at Old

Knoxville Highway through the Blount County countryside to East Lamar Alexander Parkway. It's estimated that at least a dozen private landowners would have to surrender their property, should the Tennessee Department of Transportation exercise eminent domain rights to build the roadway.

Foothills Land Conservancy, Clabough said, is an apolitical organization that takes no stance, pro or con, on such controversial topics. His personal feelings remain just that, he said, but preservation, he believes, needn't be a political football.

"I don't think preservation of a way of life, of a lifestyle, of scenic views, is political. I think that is very nonpolitical," he said. "I'm very fortunate to have traveled all over the Southeast, and in doing so I've viewed communities that do not have planning commissions that understand the need for preservation of land and preservation of open spaces, and that's certainly very troubling to me."

That doesn't mean that FLC is anti-development, he added. If anything, as a former businessman — Clabough and his wife, Judy, ran the convenience store Clabough's Market in Blount County's Wildwood community for more than 20 years before its closure in 2004 — he understands that a county's prosperity is closely tied to development. Balancing those needs against the need for the preservation of rural landscapes and wild spaces needn't conflict, but achieving that balance is often mercurial, he added.

"Seriously, it's a real tough question, and I don't know how you strike that balance," he said. "I'm certainly all, from my perspective, for land preservation, but we also have to have economic development. You just have to hope that your elected leaderships of the represented communities understand the need for both and for both to get along."

In the meantime, Clabough and the FLC staff will continue their work into 2022 and beyond. As word of mouth continues to grow, the organization has fielded inquiries in neighboring states, which allows the conservancy's reach to extend beyond East Tennessee. At the same time, the local work never stops — at the end of 2021, a parcel of 3,700 acres was gifted to FLC in Campbell County, and the organization is in preliminary discussions about adding it to the TWRA's management area.

"One of the most remarkable things about success is the word of mouth, so that people continue to call us because we're sincere about what we do and are relatively easy to work with," he said. "We work with both developers and individual landowners, and when we get a call, we go to the property and make sure it fits our mission statement, and that it's a piece of property that has conservation values and values that need to be protected."

"And most properties do. We try to make sure that there are conservation values there, but we also look at the development possibility, whether it's residential, industrial or commercial. Again, our job is not to fight development; it's to protect the pieces of property that are very important to the community at large."

Steve Wildsmith was an editor and writer for The Daily Times for nearly 17 years. Contact him at stevedailytimes@gmail.com.

Steve Wildsmith

Award-winning freelance columnist and entertainment writer Steve Wildsmith is the former WeekEnd editor at The Daily Times.