



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina transfers land to McDowell County for Fonta Flora State Trail and Marion Catawba River Greenway

MORGANTON, N.C. — On February 8, 2024, McDowell County purchased a 12.7-acre property from Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina (FCNC) on the Catawba River in McDowell County, for the dual purposes of providing access to Marion's Catawba River Greenway and to serve as a section of the Fonta Flora State Trail. The Fonta Flora State Trail is a planned 90-mile urban front country trail that will connect nine communities across three counties from Morganton to Asheville. Once constructed, the trail will cross Highway 70 and connect the greenway to the McDowell County Catawba River Park.

Plans to purchase the tract began in early 2021, when Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail (F3ST), approached FCNC to assist in acquiring the property. FCNC received a conservation loan to purchase the parcel from landowner Ford Miller. McDowell County will use the property for the development of approximately half a mile of greenway trail. F3ST was awarded funds from the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation's Complete the Trails Fund to reimburse FCNC on behalf of McDowell County to purchase the trailhead so that it can be used by the public in perpetuity.

“Foothills Conservancy is very grateful to be able to work in partnership with Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail and McDowell County,” said Tom Kenney, Land Protection Director at FCNC. “We look forward to the future completion of the Catawba River Greenway, from City of Marion property to McDowell County’s Catawba River Park, and also the routing of the Fonta Flora State Trail west to Old Fort.”

The property acquisition ensures protection of approximately 0.3 miles of the Catawba River and its forested streambank. Once the trail and public parking area are constructed, it will provide opportunities for public river access and paddling, as well as for walking and biking.

“The acquisition of this property greatly enhances the planned connection between the Catawba Greenway and the McDowell Greenway,” said Bob Hunter, former president of F3ST’s board of directors. “It will provide much needed parking, a better trail location and better access. I want to thank Foothills Conservancy and McDowell County for working with the Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail to complete this section of trail, connecting Morganton to Asheville by way of Marion and Old Fort.”

F3ST representatives also commented on the importance of collaboration in trail projects with this statement: “Partnerships are key for Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail to reach its goal of completing the trail in 10 years. This transaction is a prime example of how a private land owner, Foothills Conservancy, F3ST and McDowell County can work together towards a common goal of creating more trail, public access and river access on this side of McDowell County. Not only is this acquisition a win for the Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail, it is also a win for all in the area — from Marion and McDowell County residents to those living in or visiting the entire foothills region, from Old Fort to Morganton to Asheville.”

Because of the partnership between these three organizations, McDowell County received ownership of this property with no impact to the county budget or county resources.

“McDowell County is thankful that F3ST was able to identify state funds for the purchase of this property from FCNC, which means the property will be owned and maintained by the County at no initial cost for the local taxpayer. It’s a win-win-win and this is very exciting,” said McDowell County Manager Ashley Wooten. “The connection of these segments will further the goal of extending the Fonta Flora State Trail across the county,” he added.

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina is a nationally accredited regional land trust that inspires conservation in Western North Carolina by permanently protecting land and water for the benefit of people and all living things. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Foothills Conservancy has conserved more than 70,000 acres in its eight-county service area: Alexander, Burke, Caldwell,

Catawba, Cleveland, Lincoln, McDowell and Rutherford, in three major river basins: the Broad, Catawba and Yadkin. Information about Foothills Conservancy, including ways to support its work, can be found online at www.foothillsconservancy.org or by calling 828-437-9930.

The mission of the Friends of the Fonta Flora State Trail is to connect mountain communities in western North Carolina through the Fonta Flora State Trail to promote physical health, mental wellness, economic development and outdoor recreation with trail partners for the enjoyment and education of all people.

The Mission of McDowell County government is to provide coordinated programs and professional services that protect the health, safety, and welfare of its citizens, as well as to preserve the county's natural environment and heritage as its primary asset.

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