

Driving to Save "Horse Country"

By Jennifer M. Keeler for ELCR



When thinking of areas branded as "horse towns", Lexington, Kentucky, Ocala, Florida, and Saratoga, New York may immediately come to mind; but undoubtedly worthy of similar mention is Southern Pines, North Carolina. Located just over an hour southwest of the bustling Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area, the tranquility of Moore County has long been a haven for equestrians, even earning widespread recognition as "Horse Country."

A cornerstone of Horse Country is The Walthour-Moss Foundation, a 4,052-acre nature preserve in the Sandhills of North Carolina that is home to large stands of longleaf pines and serves as a sanctuary for numerous endangered plants and wildlife. The vision of preserving this special place took shape in 1974 when the Foundation was established as a charitable trust by William O. "Pappy" Moss, a lifelong fox hunter, to ensure the preservation of the open land that he and his wife Virginia so treasured. Long known for its equestrian use, the Foundation has also become a true environmental preserve and community asset, with land and trails open to the public year-round whether one is riding, carriage driving, walking, or running. "It was the forethought of the Mosses' donating the land that's gotten us to where we are today," explained Landon Russell, Executive Director of The Walthour-Moss Foundation. "We are very lucky to have access to over 4000 acres of open land. That's why it's so important to preserve its future."



It's a future which may be in jeopardy. In 2004, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) adopted a concept called the Strategic Highway Corridor Plan (SHCP), with the objective to create a network of high-speed freeways through the state. This plan contained five major road improvement projects in Moore County, including a reclassification of U.S. Route 1 to "freeway" status, which could result in construction of a "bypass" around downtown Southern Pines to handle high-

speed traffic. The NCDOT reported the change in U.S. 1's status as necessary to ease congestion on area roads, although citizens believe most traffic is local which would not necessarily be relieved by a freeway or bypass. Planned as an 11-mile stretch of four-lane highway which would start north of Southern Pines and reconnect with existing U.S. 1 south of Aberdeen, possible routes for the freeway bypass would inevitably cut a wide swath through area farms and Foundation land.



The Walthour-Moss Foundation has long been known for its equestrian use, which attracts world-class riders and drivers to its sandy lanes and trails. Photo courtesy of Landon Russell.

NCDOT officials insist there is no actual plan to route a \$150-million bypass through Horse Country, but citizens fear that the state department will ultimately act anyway. Public outcry at recent informational sessions and county committee meetings illustrate a lack of trust towards the NCDOT; and while local residents realize the importance of developing a Comprehensive Transportation Plan for the county for the next 30 years that will reflect the priorities of residents and local elected officials, they also feel that the

NCDOT may ultimately proceed with a bypass despite what citizens and local elected officials say and regardless of what traffic studies may reveal about the nature of the local congestion.

If the U.S. 1 bypass project were to come to fruition, Horse Country and Foundation land would be in the center of the bulls-eye. "Since there is no official line on a piece of paper from the NCDOT, it's impossible to know exactly how many acres may be jeopardized by the proposed freeway bypass," noted Russell. "Even if you were to lop off just a part of the Foundation land, no matter where you go through it will bisect the Horse Country area, which would kill it."

Russell explained that Horse Country's historical concentration of horse farms is bordered on the east by Fort Bragg and U.S. 1 to the west, with Interstate 73/74 just 20 miles away. With these boundaries, the local horse area cannot expand, making any loss critical to an industry which is a significant contributor to the economic vigor of the county and state. A recent independent assessment concluded that the local horse industry generates \$165.7 million in annual direct and indirect income in Moore County and owners pay well over \$1 million in annual property taxes. "Equestrian land is limited here, and that's one of the reasons why it's so special," she added. "So even if the bypass missed our Foundation land, it would devastate the neighboring Horse Country land."

Additionally, The Walthour-Moss Foundation is a significant contributor to the local economy by attracting thousands of visitors each year, from day trippers to seasonal residents, who also patronize local Moore County enterprises. But neither the Foundation's importance to the community, nor its

Moore County faces difficult decisions about long-term land-use planning: how to balance the needs of a growing community while preserving natural spaces and equestrian land.

status as a non-profit organization, can offer protection from land seizure by the government under "eminent domain". Eminent domain is an action of the state to seize property, or seize rights to property with due monetary compensation, but without the owner's consent. The property is taken either for government use or by delegation to third parties who will devote it to public or civic use or, in some cases, economic development. The most common uses of property taken by eminent domain are for public utilities, highways, and railroads; however, it may also be taken for reasons of public safety. Southern Pines' Foundation lands are not currently under conservation easements or other government protection. "But even these measures offer no protection against condemnation by NCDOT," explained Russell. "We would like to think that action such as the establishment of the Foundation by the Mosses would protect the land forever, but that's not necessarily the case."



The Walthour-Moss Foundation protects over 4,000 acres of long-leaf pine habitat that contains well over a hundred of the scarred trees once used for turpentine production. Photo courtesy of Landon Russell.

the destruction of Horse Country would inflict additional harm to local businesses as people would choose other locations to visit and stay rather than Southern Pines. "So this was an easy partnership between equestrians and local merchants," Russell said. "Horse people eat in the downtown restaurants and shop in the stores. It's a big draw for people. But routing drivers away on a bypass will mean people will no longer be stopping in Southern Pines." Additional concerns include the destruction of local neighborhoods, creation of unwanted sprawl, and damage caused to the entire county and the Foundation. Citizens have questioned the NCDOT's claim that another highway for through traffic is needed since the overwhelming majority of traffic is local (to date the NCDOT has not conducted any official studies to determine traffic patterns). They believe the agency should concentrate on improving existing roads instead. "The (bypass) project as proposed will further divide the community," outlined local historian Ray Owen in the Southern Pines newspaper, *The Pilot*. "It would really affect the fabric and character of our community, which is not just a bunch of wealthy people on horses. It's a diverse group of people who share a common passion to preserve this amazing amenity."

Opposition to the proposed U.S. 1 bypass has created alliance between horse enthusiasts and downtown Southern Pines merchants, illustrating how this issue affects not only equestrians, but the community's entire culture as well. Residents believe their area's uniqueness as an equestrian community would be harmed greatly by the impacts of a four-lane freeway. Also, their treasured downtown would inevitably be impacted as "big box retailers" and other businesses move to the new construction on a bypass, and

The impressive mobilization of Southern Pines equestrians and other residents demonstrates how awareness and active involvement in community planning issues is vital to the conservation of local land.

An impressive mobilization of Southern Pines equestrians and other residents demonstrates how awareness and active involvement in community planning issues is vital to conservation of land. After a series of informational sessions conducted by the Foundation, followed by several workshops hosted by government officials designed to build consensus in developing a Comprehensive Transportation Plan for the county, a large turnout of citizens (including equestrians) was imperative for demonstrating support for the Foundation and Horse Country lands and how they contribute to the quality of life in the area. On December 6, 2011, the Moore County Board of Commissioners unanimously passed a strongly-worded resolution opposing any Comprehensive Transportation Plan that would route any portion of the future U.S. 1 corridor through Horse Country, and to petition for a reclassification of the "freeway" status imposed upon U.S. 1 by the NCDOT's Strategic Highway Corridor Plan, a move which Russell

describes as "critical to the fight so the state can't override local needs and wishes." Within the next several days, the four municipalities closest to U.S. 1 also passed similar resolutions, making a clear statement to the NCDOT that land preservation is a key priority for Moore County.

But the issue is far from over, and ultimately local residents must work together to find long-term solutions to the traffic issues. Instead of a freeway, local officials point to improved signalization, access management, and other tools to manage local congestion as practical and effective tools. In a statement following the public hearing, Moore County Board of Commissioners Chairman Nick Picerno warned that citizens must remain alert and continue to fight for preservation of the land that would be disrupted by the proposed bypass route, because in reality the Board has little influence with NCDOT.

"The decisions being made now are going to dramatically affect the future of our towns and everyone who lives here," Southern Pines resident Alison McCormack told The Pilot. "Once done, the damage cannot be undone. We'll have to live with it forever. Forever is a very long time."

The Walthour-Moss Foundation was the 2010 recipient of a \$10,000 equine land conservation grant from the Equine Land Conservation Resource (ELCR) and Breyer Animal Creations. To learn more about the Foundation, visit their website, www.walthour-moss.org.

About the Equine Land Conservation Resource (ELCR): The Equine Land Conservation Resource is the only national not-for-profit organization advancing the conservation of land for horse-related activity. ELCR serves as an information resource and clearinghouse for land and horse owners on issues related to equine land conservation, land use planning, land stewardship/best management practices, trails, liability and equine economic development. For more information about the ELCR visit our website at www.elcr.org or call (859) 455-8383.