

Bad times for builders may help preserve land Local land trust getting calls from developers needing to sell.

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The recession has whipsawed real estate development in the Charlotte region, but you can find at least one silver lining in that dark cloud: Land conservation groups have a big opportunity.

"I get calls all the time from developers now," Dave Cable, Catawba Lands Conservancy executive director, said last week. He said the nonprofit land preservation group has more offers than usual from people hoping to sell land and has 1,600 acres in the pipeline for possible conservation next year.

The nonprofit, nonpolitical group has preserved more than 8,000 acres from development in the Charlotte region, including the 589-acre Mountain Creek conservation area along Lake Norman in Catawba County. Potential conservation sites are being eyed in Union, Gaston and Mecklenburg counties, he said.

The so-called highest and best use of a lot of land around here has gone from residential development to speculative land holding, Cable said. And no one knows when the market is coming back. So some owners, especially if they're having a hard time paying the carrying charges on the land, decide they need to sell, fast.

That's a big change for the Charlotte region, which saw such massive growth that one study concluded that land the size of a football field was being developed *every hour*. Developers had few incentives to set land aside for conservation, and the region is the poorer for it – except, perhaps, in pavement.

But now there's a remarkable opportunity, if the region's land trusts can find the money in tight financial times. Not every piece of land should be conserved, of course. But the Carolina Piedmont is rich in riverbanks, creeks, wetlands and forests, places that soothe the heart and preserve the soul. If we lose them, we will have lost something immeasurable.

Land preservation by land trusts gives back to all of us who inhabit this region. We wish them well.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/408/story/531232.html>



Catawba Lands Conservancy recently protected Mountain Creek tributary.