

Ex-BofA exec to lead Catawba conservancy

Tom Okel, who spent 20 years at the bank, latest banker at the trust

By Bruce Henderson - bhenderson@charlotteobserver.com

A former Bank of America executive is taking his financial skills to a new field as director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

Tom Okel spent 20 years with the bank, most recently as global head of a capital-markets division that works on corporate acquisitions, leveraged buyouts, recapitalizations and refinancing. He replaces Dave Cable, who announced his resignation in March after seven years at the land trust.

Under Cable, the conservancy doubled the amount of land it has protected, to more than 11,000 acres in six counties. It led the 2007 launch of the Carolina Thread Trail, a 15-county network of trails, waterways and conservation corridors. The trust also became one of the first nationally accredited land trusts.

Conservation groups now face headwinds in the soured economy. The drop in real estate values and development have served up tantalizing chances to acquire land, but state grants also shrank.

"Dave Cable and the entire staff has done an incredible job of managing through a tough environment," Okel said. "They've been able to take advantage of some of the great opportunities in real estate."

Okel follows a trail of banking talent to the Catawba conservancy. Cable left Wachovia Securities to join the trust. Thread Trail project director Ann Hayes Browning, who has served as interim director, also came from Bank of America after 23 years.

Okel, 48, retired from the bank in early 2010. Like others before him, he was ready to follow his passions.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I didn't want to go back into banking or financial services," he said. "I've always been an active outdoors person, hiking, camping. I took a year off before I really looked at anything, and then I became aware of this opportunity. It's a perfect alignment."

The Atlanta native has lived in the Charlotte area off and on since attending Davidson College in the early 1980s.

He serves on Davidson's board of trustees, and has chaired the board of KinderMourn, served as assistant treasurer of Myers Park Presbyterian Church and as a leader with CrossRoads Corporation for Affordable Housing and Community Development.

Okel goes to work at the conservancy on Oct. 3, leading a staff of 13.

"The conservancy and Thread Trail will benefit tremendously from Tom's leadership and commitment to executing our mission in the region," board president Tommy Lee said in a statement. "We're looking forward to the impact that Tom's appointment will have as we enter into our next phase of growth as an organization."