

Ex-BofA exec will head land conservancy

By Bruce Henderson
bhenderson@charlotteobserver.com
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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 division that manages debt for 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.

Okel follows a trail of banking talent to the Catawba conservancy. Cable came 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.

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."

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