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Survey reveals land use concerns

By Scott Nicholson

A Mars Hill College survey claims most Watauga County residents are concerned about the effect of development and growth on natural areas on water resources.

More than 70 percent of the 402 registered voters surveyed at random expressed concern over impacts to water quality, groundwater, hiking and fishing access, open space, forest land, the county's rural character, and scenic views. Nearly two-thirds percent of respondents are concerned about impacts to agricultural land.

The phone survey was conducted in March by Smithson Mills, Director of the Center for Assessment and Research Alliances at Mars Hill College, and funded by the Watauga-based **Helen M. Clabough Charitable Foundation**. It was prepared for the Southern Environmental Law Center.

The survey was spread across geography and party affiliation and aimed to represent a broad cross-section of the county. While Republicans generally showed less support for conservation efforts, they were more concerned than Democrats about the impacts of residential development on the county's rural character and impacts on scenic views.

The survey suggested Watauga voters are willing to support policies to address those impacts. Ninety percent agreed with policies that preserve buffer areas adjacent to mountain streams to protect water quality; at least 80 percent agreed with need to protect wildlife habitat and corridors, promote voluntary conservation easements, and preserve scenic views; 70 percent support policies to maintain access to trails and rivers; and 60 percent support efforts to create connections between existing parcels of open space.

About four-fifths of respondents support requiring large subdivisions to set aside natural areas for homeowner recreation and including in those natural areas stream banks, wildlife habitat, and any areas on a county greenway or open space plan.

More than 95 percent believe prospective property buyers should be informed about potential landslide hazard areas, while most agree developers should take special measures when building on landslide hazard areas.

Nancy Reigel, chairwoman of the MountainKeepers, said the survey validated what many organizations have been working toward for the past few years.

"The results of the survey give us new and powerful insights into how the citizens of Watauga County view development and how its impacts need to be managed," she said.

"The results certainly validate what MountainKeepers has observed over the past years. The residents of Watauga County care deeply and seriously about their community and want to protect its character and the things that make Watauga special. We are truly pleased with the breadth of the community resolve for assuring any future development accommodate and protect our precious resources."

Two-thirds of people said it was "very important" to set aside land for conservation and open space, and 42 percent said the county was not prepared for future residential development.

Sixty-four percent were "very concerned" about the impact of residential development on water quality.

Reigel said the results were fascinating and she said it showed "people are far more open to some controls than one would have expected."

She said the results appeared to be consistent across most categories.

