

Huge Land Protection Success in Virginia

Fourteen miles of stunning A.T. view-shed near Roanoke, Virginia were recently permanently protected with the largest conservation easement ever donated in the commonwealth of Virginia.

BY DAVID PERRY

“This is the most exciting thing to happen on our section of the A.T. in a long time,” said Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (RATC) president and Western Virginia Land Trust executive director Roger Holnback.

On April 21, Roanoke City Council voted to donate a conservation easement on 6,185 acres of Carvins Cove Natural Reserve, the second-largest city park in the United States, to the Western Virginia Land Trust and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. The A.T. runs on the ridge surrounding Carvins Cove, and the protected lands include part of the famous and often-photographed view from McAfee Knob. The Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club maintains this section of the Trail.

The Cove’s 13,000 acres of trees and rugged hills lie just three miles north of Roanoke, the largest city in western Virginia. A large reservoir running the length of the Cove serves as the major source of drinking water for the Roanoke Valley.

Conservation easements are increasingly popular ways to permanently protect open lands, scenic views, wildlife habitat, and waterways from development. Conservation-minded landowners volun-

tarily give up the rights to certain kinds of development on their land forever. The easement is enforced by a conservation organization, usually a land trust, to make sure the landowner’s wishes are carried out and the terms of the easement are not violated.

Easements are popular because the landowner still owns the property and can still sell it or leave it to his or her children. Landowners who donate conservation easements may receive generous federal, state, and local tax incentives. The public gains significant benefit from the permanent protection of the land, without saddling local, state, or federal governments with the burden of owning and caring for it.

Because it’s a local government entity, the City of Roanoke wasn’t eligible for any tax incentives. “They just did it because it was the right thing to do,” said Holnback. “The City leadership recognized that preservation of the city’s water supply has to be a top priority, and that a conservation easement of this magnitude makes a bold statement about Roanoke’s commitment to being a green city.”

The RATC has worked with the City

of Roanoke for many years to negotiate right-of-way easements for the Trail on city park property, including a 1,100-acre easement acquired following a relocation of the Trail 20 years ago. But this easement is unique in that it sets aside the portions of Carvins Cove Natural Reserve above the 1,500-foot contour interval and restricts what kinds of development can take place there. In effect, the wooded hillsides that greet hikers will always remain in their present state, without danger of development that would damage the view from the Trail.

RATC leaders and members supported the efforts of the Western Virginia Land Trust and Virginia Outdoors Foundation in recent months as those two organizations worked with the City of Roanoke to secure the conservation easement.

“The City of Roanoke and the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club have always enjoyed a strong relationship,” said Holnback. “The City recognizes that having the A.T. running just north of town is a tremendous asset to its residents and a boost for tourism. And the city administration and staff have always worked with us to protect the integrity of the Trail.”

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