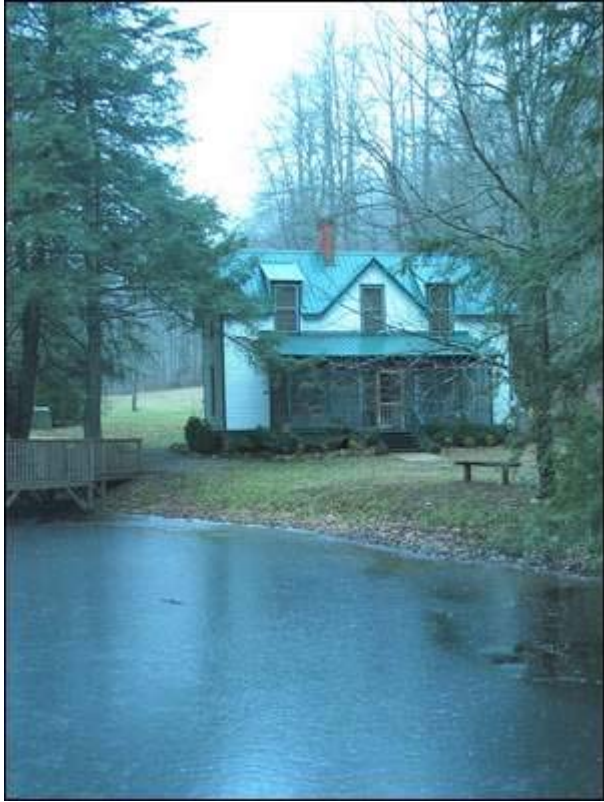


Feb 26, 2007

## Development plans moving forward



The historic Big Creek lodge in Pisgah National Forest is the proposed site of a development of 86 homes. Harrison Metzger/Times-News

By [Harrison Metzger](#)

Times-News Staff Writer

A developer is moving ahead with plans to build as many as 86 houses on 84 acres surrounded by the Pisgah National Forest and accessed through North Mills River Campground. Kent Smith, owner of Big Creek Lodge LLC, on Feb. 14 submitted plans to the Henderson County Planning Department to develop land around the historic lodge.

The land sits at the end of North Mills River Road where it turns to Yellow Gap Road, a gravel U.S. Forest Service road that connects to U.S. 276 near the Cradle of Forestry in Transylvania County.

Smith bought the lodge and land around it for \$2,175,000 in 2004 from a bankruptcy auction of properties foreclosed from Robert Warren, a Candler tomato farmer who pleaded guilty to millions of dollars in crop insurance fraud.

At that time Smith drafted plans to build 45 homes on the land, an "inholding" completely surrounded by public land and accessible from Hendersonville only through the North Mills River Recreation Area. **Conservation attempts stalled**

The Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy has been trying to raise millions to buy the land for conservation easements that would prevent it from being developed. The property is located where Rocky Fork joins the North Fork of the Mills River and is a popular point where trout fishermen, hikers, equestrians and bicyclists enter the national forest.

In November, the Conservancy sought \$1.4 million from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund, about half the \$2.9 million cost the group listed as necessary to complete the deal. The state trust fund voted in November to allocate \$1.53 million toward the state's purchase of Chimney Rock Park, but deferred action on the Big Creek project.

Kieran Roe, executive director of the Hendersonville-based conservancy, said the group is trying to find out when the state trust fund may meet again to consider the request. Roe said his group has been working with other partners,

including the Trust for Public Land, to raise money to preserve the Big Creek tract.

"I certainly hope we are able to do something, but I don't know for sure," he said Friday. "It (development) would certainly have an impact on the public recreation area and as a conservancy, we will do everything we can to work with Mr. Smith if we can."**Price tag?**

Smith said he is moving ahead with plans to develop the property in part to get a better idea of what the land is worth.

"In order for us to determine what kind of cost is associated with not developing it, we have to determine what its income potential might be," he said.

Smith said he is still open to selling the land for conservation, but has not received any offers he considers serious. He declined to say what he thinks the property is worth.

"We have continued to meet on and off with lots of people and one thing we keep running into is how do you value a property like this when there are no comparables," he said.

He added: "I have discussed numbers with them (the conservancy) but because they weren't attached to a specific plan their response seemed to be 'where are those numbers coming from?' We talked about acceptable numbers but nothing so far has been (offered) remotely close to what we talked about."

Smith also proposed swapping the tract to the U.S. Forest Service for some land in Buncombe County. But he says Forest Service officials never sent him more information as they said they would, "so it sort of died on the vine."**Subdivision plans**

Smith has employed DesignWorkshop, an Asheville landscape architecture firm, to design a subdivision master plan. The plan shows 87 homes, including about 14 on lots adjoining the North Mills River. The plans show homes built in clusters along five roads, all of which would connect to Yellow Gap Road, the Forest Service Road that runs through the property.

The plans show the maximum number of homes that could be built on the land, although Smith said that number may be reduced later. The size of the lots is not shown on the plan, but the lot sizes are small to preserve what Smith estimated as 80 percent of the land as open space.

Environmentalists and trout fishermen were alarmed last year by Smith's previously announced plans to build about 50 buildings on the land. Shaun Moore, coordinator of the Mills River Watershed Protection Project, said that many homes would harm the North Fork, a popular trout fishery.

"As the watershed coordinator, my comments are going to be (advocating) along the lines of no development at all," Moore said at the time.**Access issues**

Barring that, Moore said he would urge Smith to consider a "true low-density" development with at least five acres per home, no increase in stormwater run-off, at least 300 feet of undisturbed buffer between the streams and any land disturbances and a public right-of-away for fishing access. The location of a development next to a campground and



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along a forest road assures there will be access issues. Homeowners would have to drive through the campground and over a half-dozen speed bumps to get to their houses. The concrete bridge over the North Mills River would also have to be replaced, something Smith says his company would do. The development could not put up a gate on Yellow Gap Road, but most likely would gate the roads running to the clusters of homes, Smith said. The lodge and other property has been vandalized several times since he bought the land, he said. After one such instance, Smith erected no trespassing signs which disturbed trout fishermen who have crossed the property for years along an old road bed running up the river. The plans Smith has submitted to Henderson County show 11 homes and a "fly fishing lodge" situated on

the North Mills River near its confluence with Wash Creek. The plan also shows the developer's property line in the middle of the river, so trout fishermen would be able to hike up the middle of the river without going on private land. "I don't know how we will look at access on the Big Creek Lodge side of the bridge, but certainly the river itself would continue to be open to fishing," Smith said. He said he could provide few details yet about the price or size of the homes outlined in the master plan. "I would envision them being mountain rustic architecture, stone and timber with heavy emphasis on green building products," he said. He also said he believes most of the homes would be sold as seasonal and vacation homes to people from cities such as Charlotte and Columbia, S.C., looking for a place to fish, hike and mountain bike.

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