

Jan 23, 2006

Proposed land trade prompts concerns from Forest Service officials, others

The North Fork of the Mills River flows through the 83-acre Big Creek Lodge property. PHOTOS BY HARRISON

METZGER/TIMES-NEWS

By [Harrison Metzger](#)

Times-News Staff Writer

Federal land managers are eyeing a potential land trade that would give a developer some Pisgah National Forest acreage in Buncombe County in exchange for all or part of the 83-acre Big Creek Lodge tract next to North Mills River Campground in Henderson County. Forest Service officials have yet to make public details of the possible deal. But they are consulting with the National Park Service on how Blue Ridge Parkway views might be affected if Pisgah National Forest were to trade some forest land next to the Cliffs at Walnut Cove golfing community for the North Mills River tract, which includes about one mile of streams. "There has been a proposal to the Forest Service, however there are some issues," Lori Stroup, a Forest Service fisheries biologist, told a Mills River group last week. "Some of the property they want is in the viewshed of the Blue Ridge Parkway." Kent Smith, developer of Somersby Park in Laurel Park, bought the 83-acre Big Creek Lodge property for more than \$2.1 million in a bankruptcy auction in summer 2004. Smith recently hired an Asheville land planning firm to devise a plan to put about 45 small homes on the Big Creek tract. That has prompted concerns from trout fishermen, hikers and others who for years have crossed the land to get into the forest from the North Mills River Campground. The Big Creek Lodge property is an "inholding" of private property completely surrounded by public land, with the only access to the tract being Yellow Gap Road, the Forest Service road that runs through the campground. The Forest Service and N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission have long used the same trail that fishermen use to stock trout in the North Fork. The City of Hendersonville also has an easement for its waterline, which follows the North Fork through the Big Creek Lodge property enroute from the Hendersonville Reservoir to the city's drinking water treatment plant. "It would definitely be a win-win situation if we could acquire that property," Stroup told members of the Mills River watershed protection project at Mills River Town Hall Thursday. "As a government agency, we have to keep the best interest of all the public in mind." In addition to his own development business, Smith has worked since 1993 as a consultant to the Cliffs Communities, developers of Walnut Cove and other expensive gated golfing communities in upstate South Carolina. Since buying the Big Creek tract, he has said he is interested in trading it for land next to Walnut Cove, where he lives. Stroup said she did not know details of how much national forest land around Walnut Cove the developer is interested in acquiring. But Blue Ridge Parkway spokesman Phil Noblett said he has heard the proposal is "in the range

of 25 to 40 acres."Environmental study,public input requiredThe Forest Service is consulting with the National Park Service because the Blue Ridge Parkway crosses ridges above Walnut Cove. Parkway officials have championed the need to protect views from the scenic roadway.Because federal agencies are involved, any land trade would involve an environmental study and public input as required by the National Environmental Policy Act, Noblett said."This is a process that absolutely requires public involvement," he said Friday. "We do want to go forward and really explore it in depth."Along those lines, the Forest Service is conducting a "view area analysis" using computers to show how views from the Parkway might be affected if the land near Walnut Cove were developed, said Gary Johnson, the Parkway's chief of resource planning.The Jack Nicklaus golf course at Walnut Cove is already visible from the Parkway's Walnut Cove overlook, as are a number of homes being built in the 1,300 acre development."It is changing the view and it is not completely built out so it is hard for me to determine right now how many more houses will be visible once it is built out," Johnson said.The Cliffs Web site describes Walnut Cove as a "cradled natural amphitheater harbored by the Pisgah National Forest and Blue Ridge Parkway, yet still merely minutes from downtown Asheville, North Carolina." Homes in the development sell in a range of \$1.3 million to \$2.3 million.If the Big Creek Lodge tract were developed rather than the acreage near Walnut Cove, that development might also be seen from the Parkway, although probably not as visible.Smith's plans so far call for smaller "cabins" in the range of 1,000 square feet, and narrow roads with pullouts. That would require a variance from Henderson County's subdivision rules which require wider roads.Shaun Moore, director of the Mills River watershed protection project, said he was pleased Smith recently invited him and state and federal land managers to review the plans. He said the developer plans a very environmentally sensitive project, but the location next to the river and campground is problematic."If he was doing this anywhere else, groups like us would probably be giving him awards (for environmentally compatible development)," Moore said. But he added: "I can't think of a worse place for a housing development."Moore said he and Reggie Hall of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy are working with Smith on options to preserve all or part of the Big Creek Lodge tract through conservation easements. But Smith has not yet given them a price for selling development rights or the land outright.Smith has said he hikes and trout fishes on the land and doesn't want to do anything that would harm the adjacent campground or national forest. He has held off developing the land in the nearly year and a half he has owned it, but at some point will have to recoup his investment, Moore said."He said he could afford to sit on it awhile, but not forever," Moore said. "He has already invested a lot in doing the (development) plans."

Copyright © 2006 BlueRidgeNow.com