

2022 SCAC Awards Program

This application is for:

J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award

Project Title

Catawba Bend Preserve

County/Counties

York

Staff Contact

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Job Title

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Please provide a summary of your entry (no more than 100 words) to be used in a handout for the awards competition and included in press releases/publications. You may either type the summary in the text box or upload it as an attachment below.

It was 1,900 acres of woods, ponds and fields, sitting on the Catawba River. It was going to become a 3,000- home subdivision. This is the story of how York County Government jumped into the park business in a big and somewhat unexpected way. The County not only protected the land from a sprawling development, but purchased the site using a funding source that makes the project even more unique. Catawba Bend Preserve is becoming a reality that will serve generations of families as a tremendous asset to our quality of life.

Presentations may include more than one speaker; however, each speaker should be aware that the 10-minute time limit is strictly enforced. Please list the name, title, and e-mail address of each speaker:

Name	Title	Email
David Hudspeth	York County Manager	david.hudspeth@yorkcountygov.com
Christi Cox	York County Council Chair	christi.cox@yorkcountygov.com
Mike Moore	Assistant County Manager	michael.moore@yorkcountygov.com

To submit these attachments online, please upload Microsoft Word or PDF documents below.



Catawba Bend Preserve.JM... .docx

Please check boxes for attachments you will submit as part of your application

A concise Project Description to explain the purpose and significance of the entry (up to eight pages). Please follow the prescribed naming convention for your Project Description file.

Any additional materials needed to support your application (up to five pages).

J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award applications must include a letter of support from the county council chairperson or county chief administrative officer. Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award applications must include letters of support from the council chairperson or chief administrative officer for EACH participating political subdivision.



**SOUTH CAROLINA
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

J. MITCHELL GRAHAM MEMORIAL AWARD COMPETITION



Catawba Bend Preserve

Submission by

Greg Suskin



Benefit/Importance of Project

This is the story of the evolution of a park. A park that wasn't the original intention for a giant swath of diverse, undeveloped land bordering the Catawba River.

In 2018 several parcels of land became available for sale in eastern York County. The site totaled 1,900 acres, and much of it had been held for years by a developer seeking to build a 3,000-home subdivision there. The nearest city to the site is Rock Hill, but the property is not contiguous to city limits. The property was previously owned for many years by Bowater Company and used as an experimental Loblolly Pine farm beginning in the 1970s. Other smaller parcels were family owned.

The initial goal of York County Government and York County Council was to preserve the site and protect it from such large-scale development. Managing growth and preserving greenspaces are two issues Council and County Government hear often as top priorities for our local citizens. When it became apparent what this amazing site offered: its scenic beauty, towering Loblolly Pines, large ponds, open meadows and roughly five miles of frontage on the Catawba River, interest began to grow for the idea of creating a spectacular park. Nearly five years later it's now known as Catawba Bend Preserve. 1,700 of the 1,900 acres are now part of a conservation easement through a partnership between York County and the Nation Ford Land Trust.



Large Pond on the property

Catawba Bend Preserve will enrich the lives of not only York County residents, but outdoor enthusiasts and families far beyond our borders. The park will help meet a growing need for passive recreation that adds significantly to our quality of life. Its widely varied landscape, support for all kinds of activities, and rural location, will provide a getaway for people everywhere. Specifically, much of what the park will offer focuses on families and others who may be inexperienced with outdoor activities. Catawba Bend Preserve will host a variety of environmentally-oriented recreation activities including hiking, primitive tent camping, canoeing and boating, lake and river fishing, nature studies, picnicking, mountain biking, and birding. The goal is that it will appeal to people experiencing these activities for the first time. Many who spend a weekend tent camping, may never have done so before. In that way, the park will serve as an outdoor classroom; an introduction to nature. The park is being designed to protect its cultural and natural significance, and allow access with minimal development. In fact, visitors should leave the park with a better understanding and appreciation for the native environment and cultural heritage of the region.

York County also considers the park a valuable cornerstone for future economic development. Businesses large and small look closely at quality of life before choosing to locate or expand into a new area. The park will become a major driver for industries looking for a permanent home for their business and their workers.

In October 2021, York County Council approved the master plan for what then had a working title of *Riverbend Park*. A month later, a new name was chosen, Catawba Bend Preserve. The park represents a decades-long County effort with a build out timeframe stretching thirty years or more.

In October 2022, more than 400 people visited the park for the first time for a cross country meet featuring every middle school and high school team from all county public schools. Though the park isn't yet open to the public, the event showcased its potential, and gave the community a first look at this unique place, as most people didn't know the property was here, and owned by York County.

Over the last year, environmental assessments have been completed, and the first of three planned controlled burns were performed to manage brush, undergrowth and reduce the potential for forest fires.



Controlled burn at Catawba Bend Preserve

In early 2023, physical work on the park began in earnest. York County contracted with Colorado-based SingleTrack Trails, to build the first four miles of hiking trails in the park. The work will be completed in April. Demolition has also begun on several vacant structures on the site, including a long-abandoned 6,000 square foot home built in the 1960s.

Currently, the main park loop road is in the design phase as are restroom facilities and parking areas. These are the first steps toward creating the park.

[Project Effort/Difficulty](#)

There were multiple significant hurdles to this project. First, in the purchasing phase, confidentiality was critical to avoid price inflation. York County worked with people outside the immediate market to act as the buyer, and negotiate on behalf of the County. The County was aggressive on the timing of the purchase, and able to close quickly on the property. There was tremendous trust among all parties involved, and that allowed for clear direction, quick decision-making and the right atmosphere for teamwork on such a massive purchase, at a price of \$21.6 million for all 1,900 acres. We also had another ace up our sleeve when it came to competitive bidding on the property. The person serving as the strawman for the County in the transaction offered to pay the required five years of rollback taxes on the property as it had to be rezoned for development. That helped seal the deal since the seller didn't know York County was the buyer, and therefore no rollback taxes would be owed. That gave us a bidding advantage of several million dollars.

Secondly, the funding for the purchase and the future build out of the park is also unique.

The land purchase is being funded through hospitality taxes. There was no tax increase and no general fund monies used for the property acquisition. York County was able to use its AAA credit rating to borrow the money, and not apply any debt service millage. The hospitality tax revenue is roughly \$3.4 million per year. Annual debt service on the purchase is \$1.7 million. There were no significant concerns voiced by the community, and neighbors were glad to see the land preserved as greenspace and not developed into a massive subdivision.

Financing the purchase took some creative thinking and planning. Our CFO/Assistant County Manager Kevin Madden had the idea to use eligible hospitality taxes. At the time, that revenue source was mostly being used to market Rock Hill area events, funding the York County Convention and Visitor's Bureau. York County was able to divert these funds to purchase the land.

Some members of York County Council at the time had concerns about the cost of maintenance of the property, estimated at \$50,000 to \$70,000 annually. Staff was able to demonstrate that hospitality tax revenue would cover the maintenance as well as the debt service on the purchase.

York County hired experienced consultants to create the master plan for the project. Chuck Flink with Greenways Inc. of Durham, N.C. and Dan Dodd of the Dodd Studio of Fort Mill, SC were the design consultant team. They completed a comprehensive site analysis including a study of soils, topography, hydrology, floodplains, vegetation, cultural history, context of surrounding properties and existing structures and infrastructure.

Local citizens played an active role in this huge project, and still do. Roughly 1,500 people weighed in on a detailed survey, asking how often they might use the park, and what activities they'd like to see there. Shortly after the purchase of the property, the Riverbend Steering Committee was formed. The committee is made up of six citizens, and three members of Council serve as ad hoc members. Once the name of the park was formally announced in November of 2021, the name of the committee became the Catawba Bend Steering Committee.

York County has also been blessed with some wonderful and transformational help from local Boy Scout troops. A park like this is a great place to implement Eagle Scout projects. One scout restored an old greenhouse and built a rainwater reclamation system to help provide water for a local master gardener's program.



Water Reclamation Scout Project

A second scout built a large wooden deck overlooking one of the main ponds on the property. Now that spring is here, more such projects are in the pipeline. Several local high school and college cross country coaches worked with Park Manager Tom Dissington, to lay out and create a 5k course that was used for the first time in October of 2022.

There are numerous goals left to achieve as the park is just getting off the ground. At this time, completion of the master plan will be funded through hospitality taxes and any grants which can be secured. When funding is available the park will be built in phases with basic infrastructure at the forefront. It's likely the original master plan will evolve over time just as the park itself will. York County anticipates roughly \$1 million per year to be available for park development. Currently, a foundation is also being established to assist with fundraising for the park. York County will also leverage local dollars as matching funds for state, federal and private funding sources.

Project Originality/Innovation

There are several factors illustrating the uniqueness of the creation of this park. The first being the funding source. As mentioned, the purchase, maintenance and long-term development of the park will rely on hospitality taxes. Thankfully, due to York County's location in a major metropolitan area, there is sufficient revenue to generate the taxes needed for such an endeavor. The idea to pursue that vision is a credit to our Assistant County Manager and CFO Kevin Madden. Madden mentioned a local citizen named Lindsay Walker who first heard about the land being up for sale. "He invited me to go to a York County Forever meeting in Rock Hill, said he had something interesting he wanted me to hear about, and the property had just been advertised for sale," Madden said.

Another aspect of its uniqueness is that York County was never a major player in the parks business. Three years ago, there was one county park. This was a big departure for York County because leaders recognized the quality of life benefit, and the potential impact on economic development. The creation of Catawba Bend Preserve is the main reason York County formed a parks department in 2022. The County hired a parks director, Katherine Jones, added additional staff, and other parks are currently in development.

Catawba Bend Preserve is a true launching pad for York County. The local community is more focused on passive recreation, outdoor experiences, and parks as an important aspect of life. Preserving greenspace is paramount in a county where rapid growth is the number one issue for residents.

As the park is built it will eventually boast a five-mile riverfront walking path, 25 miles of interior hiking trails, dozens of primitive camping sites, an RV park, mountain biking areas, and a natural amphitheater for events.



Additional Materials

Catawba Bend Preserve Map



Figure 17: Riverbend Park Master Plan



PROPOSED ACTIVITY ZONES

Catawba River Greenway: 5-Mile River Greenway

Loblolly: 25-Mile Hiking Trail System

Heron Point: River Observation Area

Crayfish: Catawba River Access

Red Oak: Recreation & Outdoor Events Center

Barred Owl: Overnight Camping

Bluegill: Lake Access, Fishing and Water Sports

Salamander: Environmental Education Center

The Lodge: Multi-Purpose Building & Events Center

Copperhead: Mountain Bike Park

The Falcon: Luxury Motorcoach Park

Phased building plan

Phase One Park Development Strategy (Term: First 5 years)

Park Arrival

Main Gatehouse

Park Loop Road

Catawba River Greenway

Loblolly: Hiking Trails Phase 1

Barred Owl: Camping Phase 1

Bluegill: Lake Fishing/Boating Phase 1

Crayfish: River Access Phase 1

Red Oak: Event & Recreation Phase 1

Phase Two Park Development Strategy (Term: 6 to 10 years)

The Lodge

East & West Gatehouses

Loblolly: Hiking Trails Phase 2

Barred Owl: Camping Phase 2

Bluegill: Lake Fishing/Boating Ph. 2

Red Oak: Events and Recreation Ph. 2

Salamander: Environ. Education Ph. 1

Copperhead Phase 1

**Phase Three
Park
Development
Strategy
(Term: 11 to 15
years)**

Copperhead: Mtn. Bike Park Phase 2

Salamander: Environ. Ed. Phase 2

The Falcon: Luxury RV Park Phase 1

Loblolly: Hiking Trails Phase 3

Barred Owl: Camping Phase 3

Bluegill: Lake Fishing/Boating Phase 3

Red Oak: Events & Recreation Phase 3



April 10, 2023

J. Mitchell Graham Award Judges
South Carolina Association of Counties
1919 Thurmond Mall

Dear Honorable Judges:

It is with great privilege and honor that I write this letter of support for York County's Catawba Bend Preserve "Catawba Bend." When complete Catawba Bend will be a nature-based outdoor recreation preserve connecting visitors to activities and programs that celebrate the native landscapes and ecosystems of York County.

In December, 2018, York County Council proactively purchased 1,900 acres of pristine riverfront property along the Catawba River for \$21 million. This property was formerly owned by a local paper mill and later eyed for high density residential development by a private developer. When the property went on the market for sale, York County initiated a very ambitious and yet achievable vision to purchase and preserve the land for public enjoyment and access.

It only takes one visit to this preserve to know that this is one of those rare properties that could forever change the quality of life in York County and be an investment that economically impacts our local area, the region, and the state. The decision to purchase the property was in the best interest of the community and the County identified an existing H-Tax funding stream to fund the purchase, which resulted in no tax increase. To further protect our tax payers, York County hired a strawman to ensure the County, as the buyer, remained anonymous to the seller. This strategic move ensured our tax payers received the best value.

Once purchased, York County Council hired renowned President of Greenway Incorporated Chuck Flink, and Landscape Architect Dan Dodd from the Dan Dodd Studio to assist with the development of a masterplan for the land. Additionally, Council created a citizen Committee to advise Council. York County Council knew that this property could be phenomenal and enjoyed by residents for years to come; however, it had to be planned out in such a way and with such a purpose to meet the recreation needs of not just this generation but future generations.

To ensure this property was preserved for public enjoyment and access for future generations, York County Council also took the initiative to immediately place 1700 acres of the land under a conservation easement in 2020 with the Nation Ford Land Trust. The Nation Ford Land Trust partnered with the County because they believed this purchase to be one of the most monumental decisions the Council had ever made, and they knew this land would have a lasting legacy. In a unique partnership, two entities in perpetuity saved an enormous amount of land. This was deemed as a remarkable achievement for a property this size.

Public input was a vital component in the planning stages for Catawba Bend; as well as, in guiding the Committee, Council, and the consultants to ensure the community's needs were aligned with the masterplan's guidance for the development of this land. York County provided public meetings and two public surveys to engage residents and to incorporate their feedback into the masterplan.

In 2021, the Masterplan was approved by Council. The masterplan guides current and future Catawba Bend development in such a way that respects the quality of the landscape and will enhance the landscape through future park development. Not only that, most importantly, this masterplan serves as a strategic plan to ensure the landscape will be transformed with amenities that serve the interests of residents. This "community first" mindset is what makes this preserve even more unique and significant. The residents of York County were the chief benefactors of this initiative and involved in the planning of the amenities for this land every step of the way.

Furthermore, York County is respecting the landscape and culture of this land by partnering with the Catawba Indian Nation. Rivercane is a culturally significant plant for the Catawba Indians, and it is located on the Catawba Bend property. Recognizing how important rivercane is to the Catawba Indian heritage, York County provides access for the Catawba Indians to harvest rivercane from the Catawba Bend property for their cultural and heritage uses.

In conclusion, thank you for your consideration of Catawba Bend for the J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award. Catawba Bend was a tremendous, "out of the box" investment for York County that required creative and cooperative planning from many individuals, organizations and the community to make happen. To be able to preserve such a unique property for public use while also using existing revenue streams is not only smart and sustainable planning, it is the type of development that creates opportunities for future economic growth that benefits all and preserves resources. We are very proud to preserve a large piece of land that will always respect the inherent beauty and functional characteristics of the native landscape, be a park for everyone to enjoy, and provide a diverse education program for children. As you can see, York County Council dreamed big, took control of our own destiny, and is on our way to creating a nature-based park for everyone that is preserved indefinitely. Thus, creating an identity that will forever set York County apart.

Sincerely,



Christi P. Cox,
Chairwoman
District 5
York County Council