

## **Lincoln County (NC) Source Water Protection Award Summary 2014**

Back in 2007, Lincoln County leaders recognized the importance of protecting their source of drinking water for the future, and for maintaining natural space for their citizens. They became interested in purchasing and protecting one of the few remaining undeveloped pieces of property available around Little Creek Cove, on Lake Norman, where the intake for their surface water treatment plant is located. They learned of a loan program administered by the North Carolina Public Water Supply Section (PWSS), where low interest loans to protect drinking water quality were available to parties who developed a state approved Source Water Protection (SWP) Plan. Then, as “they” say, the rest is history. With a diligence, drive, and determination to be reckoned with, county personnel assembled a group of people known as their SWP Committee, with the common mission of making their dream of creating a permanent preserve in their county a reality.

Over the next several months, the SWP Committee met many times to discuss their goals and objectives, and the result was a comprehensive SWP Plan that was approved by the State in March of 2008. The Plan consisted of many recommendations including enacting a Stormwater Ordinance, and transferring riparian buffer rule enforcement from the State to the County. The most important element of the Plan, however, was the purchase of the 116-acre tract surrounding Little Creek as it flows into Little Creek Cove that would eventually become the Rock Springs Nature Preserve.

After a lengthy period of setbacks, disappointments, and much navigation through bureaucratic red tape, the County received a loan check for 1.65 million dollars from the PWSS in August of 2008. With additional funds from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund and from the County, they began construction on the Nature Preserve in 2013. Phase I, the first eight acres establishing an infrastructure to allow access to the rest of the project, was completed, and their grand opening and dedication ceremony was held on June 7, 2014. At that time, the Preserve consisted of a picnic shelter, hiking trail, playground, amphitheater, outdoor classroom, and a track trail. The Preserve has since hosted an educational field day for sixth graders from two schools conducted by Lincoln County Soil and Water Conservation, and they plan to organize many more.

Phase II of the project will begin next fall and will consist of an additional loop to the walking trail which will transverse the creeks and wetlands and provide educational displays about the important role the piece of property plays in the protection of the County’s drinking water source. It is important for conservation because of its location at the head of the cove where four drainages converge to form Little Creek, the sensitive stream which flows into Little Creek Cove. The property acts as a large natural buffer that catches rainwater and slowly releases it after naturally filtering out contaminants. There will also be another small outdoor classroom as part of Phase II. In addition, 100 plus acres of the property will be put under a permanent conservation easement.

Other benefits of the acquisition of the property include the location of a passive park, the establishment of a multi-user (non-motorized) trail, and a destination location to connect with the Carolina Tread Trail and the future Lake Norman Bike Route. It is also anticipated that the property will be designated as a historical site because of an old home site located there.

Lincoln County deserves recognition for its foresight, diligence, and focus in initiating this project, and following through with the complex, time consuming effort to achieve the goals they set for themselves. They offer an excellent example to other communities for what is possible with hard work and determination. Lincoln County was the major player in this project, but there is also a long list of other people and organizations who supported the effort, and deserve appreciation for this successful collaboration.