

Subject: Pennies for Preservation
8 February 2023

As mayor, I like getting positive feedback, all elected officials do, it makes for a good week and last week was a very good week. After writing this column last week, where I proposed a program where businesses collected voluntary donations for preservation, I received overwhelming and enthusiastic feedback. Everyone sent me messages stating such a program was long overdue and would be great for the community and efforts toward preserving this unique, beautiful environment.

I have learned a lot since I wrote the article. Let me share with you what I have learned and what I believe should be the next steps toward implementation.

Surprisingly, two business leaders sent emails informing me their businesses were already doing a similar program. Richard Delany of OEI told me they had been collecting donations from customers for quite a while, and they send the money to the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust. George Powell, the creator and owner of Highlands Aerial Park told me that they have also been collecting donations for support of the land trust.

The added good news of the OEI and Highland Aerial Park efforts is that we have a foundation of key businesses on which to build this preservation program. I envision other hospitality businesses becoming a part of the effort. Restaurants would be key venues, as well as hotels and motels. STR operators may also want to participate as well as the folks in Cashiers.

I also believe the program must be focused entirely on preservation. I had lunch this past week with Carlton King, the chairperson of the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust Board of Directors. Carlton was also enthusiastic about the program, which would support their preservation efforts. He stressed that the land trust holds over 3,000 acres of beautiful, undisturbed land in their care and trust. While the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust is committed to acquiring more land to be put into preservation easements, Carlton stressed there were considerable costs for continually managing and caring for the land they hold in trust.

Their staff is not only engaged in acquisition efforts, but they are also involved in maintenance, education, and research initiatives across the Highlands-Cashiers Plateau and in other areas in the local Western Carolina region. Simply put, once the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust acquires a property, that is only the beginning of its ongoing preservation commitment.

The next question is, how does the community implement the program? I have my ideas about the shape and form of the program. For instance, I think the name should be *A Dollar for Preservation*, not pennies. I have my ideas about the shape and form of the program, which I look forward to sharing with a working committee. In such a meeting, broad community input is needed and Businesses and their insights are keys to the success of the program.

In the coming weeks, I will reach out to community leaders about how to proceed. A community meeting, or meetings, will be an important step in the process. Perhaps a committee of business and community leaders and land trust representatives could address key issues such as communication to the public, program design and collection of donations, and distribution of funds.

As I stated in my first article, this should not be a top-down government program but rather a grassroots, community-driven initiative. Highlands and Cashiers have talented people with the expertise and energy to make this program a reality.