

# Families buying 5,000 acres of land

## Purchase largest in Blount County since '30s

By Robert Wilson

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WALLAND — In what's being described as the largest land purchase in Blount County since the 1930s, a coalition of families is setting aside the vast majority of about 5,000 acres on and around Chilhowee Mountain to protect it from development.

Deeds and documents were recorded Friday on a huge wilderness tract that covers the top of an eight-mile ridgeline known as the Three Sisters, a close-set group of peaks on Chilhowee Mountain northeast of Walland.

Two of the three peaks are inside the boundaries of the protected land, said Darrell Akins, CEO of AkinsCrisp Public Strategies, which is representing the group.

Purchase price for the property was about \$20 million, Akins said, adding that when the federal government bought the land for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1930s, the Three Sisters area was intended to fall within the park boundaries.

The land has been owned for many years by New Forestry LLC, which Akins described as a timber trust. The land has not been logged in decades, he said.

The Three Sisters can be seen from vantage points along U.S. Highway 321 near Heritage High School. Blount County Mayor Jerry Cunningham said Tuesday that plans for the mountain are "very fascinating."

"I think everybody would be pleased that this property will be protected," he said.

The 5,000 acres stretches from the Sevier County line to Highway 321 in an irregular shape.

It was purchased by Three Sisters Mountain Investment LLC, whose partners include the Haslam family, of travel center operator Pilot Corp.; Ruby Tuesday restaurant chain founder Sandy Beall; Brad Martin, former CEO of Proffitt's; the Clayton family, of manufactured housing giant Clayton Homes; and the family of Charlie Hicks, businessman and East Tennessee landowner.

The four children of U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander also have a 1 percent stake in the project, but the senator and his wife are not principals in the deal. In a statement, a spokesman for the senator said he is "delighted with the purchase of nearly 5,000 acres in East Miller's Cove to protect the view of the Smokies."

The Beall family's Blackberry Farm will be responsible for managing the development portion of the project under the direction of Walt Lane.

"We believe that the prudent use for the mountains that remain in that area would be only very light-touch development, with an emphasis on land conservation," Lane said

Tuesday. “We’re serious about that.”

It is unclear exactly when the peaks picked up the Three Sisters name or who gave it to them. Akins said the name arose because they are or were visible from the campus of Maryville College. Longtime residents of the Walland area say they have never heard them called the Three Sisters.

Cunningham said only 75 to 125 homes will be developed inside the tract and that the rest of the land will be left undisturbed.

“Knowing the people involved,” the mayor said, “they are people of their word. If they tell you they are going to do something, it will happen that way.

“I live out that way, and I see the Three Sisters every morning.”

In a release, Akins quoted Bill Clabough, executive director of the Foothills Land Conservancy, as saying, “We can’t thank these folks enough for what they’ve done through the years for preserving and protecting the natural beauty of our region.”

The land acquisition has been in the works for about three years, Akins said, and has included consultations with nationally recognized land conservancy groups.

Cunningham added that Blackberry Farm management has been “good stewards” of the land there, and he expects no less in connection with the Three Sisters project.

News Sentinel business writer Josh Flory contributed to this report.



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