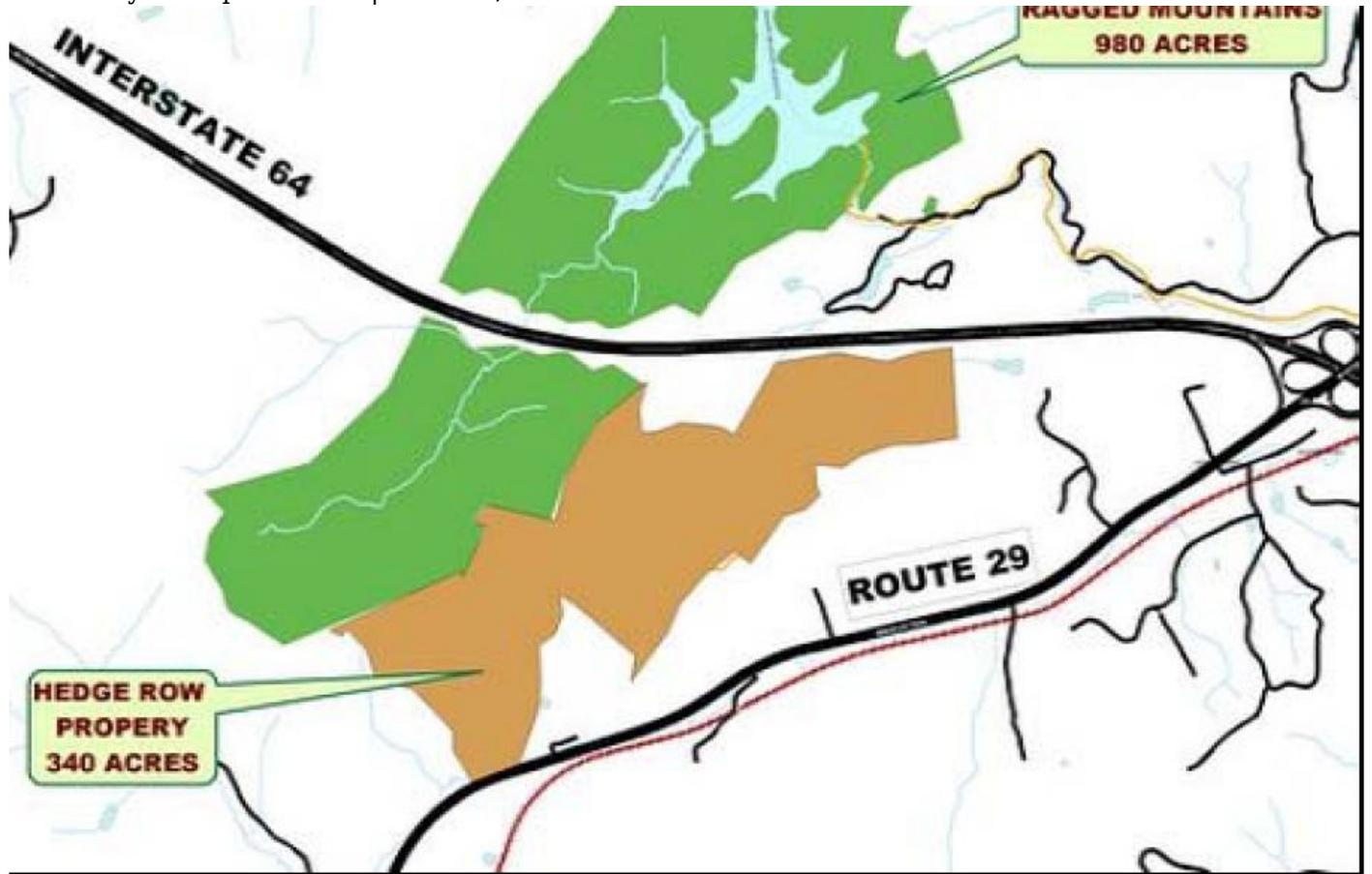


Albemarle accepts 340 acres for future park south of Ragged Mountain Reservoir
written by Newspack Team | March 4, 2015



Albemarle County officials are expected to start planning for a future county park, but when the facility will open to the public is unclear.

Supervisors on Wednesday voted to accept 340 acres south of the Ragged Mountain Reservoir that the Nature Conservancy has held since December 2006. It formerly belonged to the late Jane Heyward, a noted conservationist and naturalist.

"I first started walking that site with Jane Heyward in 1999," said Dan Mahon, the county's outdoor recreation supervisor. "She wanted to give it to the county as a park maybe for cycling or potentially equestrian use."

The land, known as the Hedgerow property, is immediately south of a 980-acre natural area that surrounds the reservoir.

A conservation easement held by the Nature Conservancy allows for the land to be used as a park, including small shelters, picnic areas, trails, restrooms and support buildings.

Parks staff had requested that the county develop the park at a cost of \$450,000 in fiscal year 2017, but that was not recommended in the county executive's budget and the project remains unfunded.

The park would have an annual operating cost of \$65,000.

"The Hedgerow property is basically undeveloped with no network of existing trails and roads to maintain," said Bob Crickenberger, the county's parks and recreation director.

Supervisor Liz Palmer has asked during recent budget work sessions for staff to find some level of funding to get the park going because of its proximity to the urban area. However, she did not get support from other supervisors to do that.

Crickenberger said design work could begin without a specific appropriation by using volunteers.

A group of interested citizens will be invited to identify possible trail locations. They will also inventory the land's natural resources on the site in a process he calls a "bio-blitz."

Those volunteers will come from groups such as the county Natural Heritage Committee, the Virginia Master Naturalists and the Charlottesville Area Mountain Biking Club.

The county previously used this process to get two land donations in northern Albemarle turned into parks. The Patricia Ann Byrom Forest Preserve and the Preddy Creek Trail Park opened in 2011.

"They assisted with the design process, development of the concept plan, the bio-blitz and they put boots on the ground with the development of the trail systems themselves," Crickenberger said, adding that more than 15 miles of trails were built at those two parks by volunteers.

"This can be a very long but very strategic process in terms of the trail design and development," Crickenberger said.

Palmer said she was satisfied that design work can begin at the Hedgerow park, but she will continue to push for it open as soon as possible.

"I think that's amazing ... but I will say that after all this volunteer work is done, I would like to get something in for future years to open up the park," Palmer said.

The future park is bordered by U.S. 29 and Interstate 64 and access to the park will eventually be from U.S. 29.

Crickenberger said the existing entrance to the property is not up to the Virginia Department of Transportation's standards and a deceleration turn lane may be required.

Parks staff will work with Heyward's family to come up with a name for the park.

Last year, the county accepted 410 acres just to the south of the Hedgerow acquisition that will eventually become the William S. Woods Natural Heritage Area. Supervisors only agreed to receive the land after the nonprofit Rockfish Valley Wildlife Preserve offered to look after the property until it can be developed.

"Right now we are identifying the boundaries and putting up markers as a way of getting to know the [Woods] site," Mahon said.

The Nature Conservancy still holds the title for 122 acres of property on Buck Island Creek near Fluvanna County. Crickenberger said he hopes to bring that acquisition before the board later this year.

There is also no identified funding to develop that park either.