

W.Va. governor places Albemarle's largest conservation easement on local property
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West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice is starting to clear his name in Albemarle County.

After paying over \$300,000 in back taxes in early June, the James C. Justice Cos. has placed the largest conservation easement in Albemarle on the company's property.

"It's one whale of a sacrifice from a financial standpoint," Justice said in a phone interview. "At some point in time, you've got to say to yourself, is money worth the level of carnage that could happen to this incredible viewshed of Monticello."

The Albemarle Conservation Easement Authority voted to accept the restrictions on the Justice property in early June. The agreement was recorded in the Albemarle County Circuit Court on Friday.

Conservation easements encourage landowners to commit to leaving their properties undeveloped into perpetuity in exchange for lower taxes.

The program promotes the county's Comprehensive Plan goals of preserving the character and resources of rural areas and of concentrating population growth within the boundaries it has defined as "development areas".

According to Rex Linville, of the Piedmont Environmental Council, more than 100,500 acres of property are under easement in Albemarle, or roughly one-fifth of the county's total acreage.

"I've seen a lot of really positive growth in the area — there are a lot more opportunities in Charlottesville — but the natural resources and the scenic views are the essence of what draws people here and keeps people here," said Conservation Easement Authority Chairman Jay Fennell.

More than half the size of the city of Charlottesville, the Justice property stretches 4,500 acres, or approximately seven square miles, to the south of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and James Monroe's Highland.

The Justice Cos. first missed its real estate tax payment to Albemarle in 2016. The county was preparing to auction the property this November if the company did not pay its back taxes.

When asked why the company did not pay county taxes for several years, Justice responded that his company did not file for bankruptcy, like other companies that have owed back taxes. (Justice did not specify any companies in particular.)

"You've got to always understand, you've got to keep the whole everything running, so we pay things as promptly as we can. At the end of the day, we get them paid," Justice said.



View of land owned by the James C. Justice Cos. from Ed Jones Road, looking northwest towards Charlottesville.

The easement limits development on the property to 10 dwellings, including potential barn apartments, and subdivision of the land to five pieces.

Linville has been calling the Justice Cos. to advocate for an easement on the property since the company bought the property from MeadWestvaco Corp. in 2010, he said.

Both companies have used the property for logging. The right to do forestal and agricultural activities on the property will continue under the easement, with some restrictions to ensure sustainability.

"Oftentimes, there's a misperception that a conservation easement is trying to preserve land as a wilderness area, just a hands-off thing, when really we're trying to preserve a working landscape," Linville said.

The conservation easement requires that the Justice Cos. and any future landowners use Virginia Department of Forestry best management practices to prevent erosion. The easement also requires that the landowner protect the property's streams with 50 feet of trees, shrubs and grasses on either side.

Albemarle has the highest number of acres under easement in Virginia after Fauquier County, which has more than 107,000 acres under easement, Linville said. The addition of the Justice property gets Albemarle closer to, but does not exceed, Fauquier's total.

This article was updated on Friday, July 12 after the easement was officially recorded in the Albemarle County Circuit Court.



A tree stump on the Justice property.