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FEATURED

Massive Stonehill Pines Site Purchased for Preservation

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Conservation buyer Tim Sweeney purchased the nearly 1,500-acre site, known commonly as Stonehill Pines, with the intent to preserve the property.

One of the area's most attractive parcels, a large swath of land sandwiched between Pinehurst and Foxfire, is now in the hands of a conservation buyer who intends to preserve it for its natural beauty.

The nearly 1,500-acre site, known commonly as Stonehill Pines, was purchased by Cary-based businessman Tim Sweeney for \$6 million on Dec. 20.

“I bought this land because it has a nice longleaf pine forest and was available for a reasonable price. I’ll be holding it until I find a permanent nature conservation home for it, which will take years or decades,” Sweeney said in an email.

Sweeney is founder and CEO of Epic Games, a video and 3-D software company in Cary, and he is also one of the state’s largest private landowners.

Following the economic recession in 2008, Sweeney began buying undeveloped, undervalued properties for conservation purposes, including the 5,185-acre Box Creek Wilderness. Box Creek is filled with rare and imperiled plant species in the foothills of western North Carolina.

Here in the Sandhills, native plant and animal species are fighting their own battle for survival against threats from habitat loss due to development, which also breaks up natural corridors, and lack of fire, which is a required element for a healthy longleaf ecosystem.

Sweeney said he’s had the opportunity to visit the Stonehill Pines property three times and described it as beautiful, with mostly longleaf pines and oak trees.

“I just plan to hike it and do some tree thinning and burning for ecosystem restoration until I find a permanent conservancy or state home for it,” he said.

Stonehill Pines was initially presented to the Foxfire Village Council in November 2008, and the property was annexed in early 2009. It was envisioned as a world-class, mixed-use, golf resort community. Plans called for a phased long-term development that would feature two championship golf courses, a resort hotel and spa, a low density community of 1,050 homes, and up to 90,000 square feet of retail, dining and office space. A member of the Jack Nicklaus Golf Club, Stonehill was conceived as the fourth club in the U.S., and 17th internationally, selected to participate in this selective and reciprocal access membership program.

A signed agreement between Foxfire and Stonehill partners required the developer to extend a water line from the Moore County Water System to Foxfire, construction of an on-site wastewater treatment plant that would also irrigate the golf courses, plus additional financial commitments to help cover renovation costs to the village’s pool and complex, and training and equipping an additional police officer.

However, while the ink was drying on these carefully crafted plans, the national economy was sinking fast. The developers were granted several annual extensions to the agreement before the Stonehill Pines LLC folded.

The property was handed over to Carolina Farm Credit and has been actively listed on-and-off the real estate market for several years.

Sweeney said he was referred to the property by a neighbor, who is also a developer and customer of Carolina Farm Credit.

Foxfire Mayor Mick McCue said he is pleased with the outcome.

“As far as Foxfire Village is concerned, we like our niche. We are known for large lots and a quiet, low-density development alternative in southern Moore County,” McCue said. “We felt this (conservation) was something that might be an attractive alternative and provide a buffer to future development, and will help the environment.

“We certainly don’t see this as a negative in the long run because of what we are trying to be,” he added.

Over the last few years, he said there has been various interested parties in the property, including developers looking to create smaller-scale projects, equestrian estates and even a private gun club.

McCue said he hopes the conservation efforts on the property will eventually include publicly accessible hiking or walking trails, and that the village is negotiating for a one-acre parcel on the property for a future municipal well site.

“Tax-wise, there are gains from development but there are other ways that Foxfire will gain from this. We think it will make our community more desirable,” McCue said.

Not surprisingly, local conservation groups are excited for what the future now holds for this land.

“Longleaf has conservation importance and also supports our military and tourism industries. It’s not just pretty, it is a large part of our economy,” said Jesse Wimberley, Sandhills Area Land Trust outreach coordinator.

“Tim Sweeney is known throughout conservation circles and it is wonderful that this came to be in his wheelhouse and is where he wanted to be. He is just one of those people who puts his money in a good, positive place,” he added.

Wimberley coordinates the NC Sandhills Burn Association efforts for SALT, connecting landowners with peer support, training and tools to meet the longleaf restoration goals on their property. This initiative is a partnership between SALT, the NC Cooperative Extension, and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

He said the Stonehill Pines property is a crucial piece of land for the the red-cockaded woodpecker. There are existing populations in Fort Bragg and Southern Pines, and there used to be one in the Foxfire area with efforts underway to restore it.

“That land is a key anchor for that natural corridor. It is important that people who are managing longleaf forests are not just protecting them but they are being restored,” Wimberley said. “Our goal is to restore corridors, these connected areas of longleaf restoration.”

Interestingly, the largest player and funding source for restoration efforts is the Department of Defense.

“There are many restrictions that come with federally endangered species. The DOD and conservation community forged a relationship to mutually benefit each other. We are working with private landowners to be stewards of their land, which diminished the burden on Bragg,” Wimberley said.

The longleaf forest was, at one time, the largest landscape in the United States: a 90-million acre wilderness, stretching from Virginia to Florida to Texas. Today that figured has dwindled to 3 million acres, and there is a national effort to try and restore it.

“When we say longleaf, it’s not just the tree but the ecosystem. And one of the main hotspots is right here in Moore County,” Wimberley said. “We are precedent setting in how we’ve coordinated all of these agencies to work together on a common goal of putting it back.”

Much of the remaining longleaf in the Sandhills is on privately owned property around Fort Bragg and Camp Mackall, land targeted to help create a natural bridge that will eventually stretch from Drowning Creek to the Uwharrie Mountains.

“This property, Stonehill, is part of that bridge. That is its significance,” he said. “It is a beautiful tract of land but it is more important as a piece in this puzzle than it is a single piece of land.”

“This is a major win for the longleaf restoration community,” Wimberley added.

Jeff Marcus, longleaf pine restoration director for the Sandhills Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, describes Stonehill Pines as “an ecologically significant property.”

He said the conservation community has long been interested in purchasing the property but simply could not compete financially for the tract.

“The protection of this property now should cause us to reassess our conservation strategy for this region,” Marcus said.

The Stonehill property is near a portion of the Sandhills Gameland, a 65,000 acre nature reserve owned by the state in the northeastern corner of Richmond County.

“The Gameland is an absolute treasure. Many of us who live in the Sandhills don’t know much about it but it is a national treasure. It is one of few places on the planet where you can find fully functioning longleaf pine ecosystem,” Marcus said.

The vast property is managed for hunting, bird watching, photography, research, and a variety of outdoor uses by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. Their maintenance includes prescribed burns on approximately 20,000 acres each year.

“It is a big effort that they put in. The Wildlife Commission does a great job of managing it,” Marcus said. “Folks who are newer to the area may not be familiar with the practice, but fire is essential to the longleaf forest.”

The Sandhills Gameland encompasses a core property and several outlying blocks, including two near Foxfire.

“It is not immediately next door to Foxfire. But certainly as the woodpecker flies, it is not far away,” Marcus said.

A recent analysis of woodpecker habitats found the birds were starting to move back and forth along two natural corridors. One corridor extends from Bragg, through Southern Pines and Pinehurst, then down Hoffman Road to the Gameland. A second corridor is in Hoke County, between Raeford and Aberdeen, connecting Bragg to Camp Mackall and the Gameland.

“One big focus has been to connect all of the populations on Bragg with the populations on the Gamelands. They were not able to interbreed,” Marcus said. “When we saw there were two routes the birds are taking, that is good news.”

However, he cautioned the analysis also emphasized how tenuous these natural corridors can be. Marcus said he is concerned about development pressure impacting the populations and also the impact of the proposed Western Connector road. A four-lane bypass, the controversial proposed road would connect N.C. 211 in West End to U.S. in Aberdeen, through mostly undeveloped land around Foxfire.

“Unlimited growth is not necessarily the best outcome for this region. What makes this area special, and for people like me to want to live here, are the natural places we have around here,” Marcus said. “I am not opposed to growth and new jobs, but we need to be smart about it.”

The Nature Conservancy is active in protecting land in the Sandhills but has not been particularly active in this portion of Moore County, Marcus said. Through work with private landowners involved in the Safe Harbor program, helping with controlled burns, and conservation easements, many species are hanging on.

“Things like Bachman’s sparrow, the pine snake, Sandhills lily, pine barrens tree frog, and the red-cockaded woodpecker, these species are sensitive to development and have been lost in other parts of Moore,” he said. “But with emphasis on continued growth — Pinehurst is expanding, Foxfire is growing, West End and Seven Lakes are putting pressure on the other side — it is not so hard to see over the next decade becoming overrun and losing all these species.”

Sweeney said he will likely try to purchase some adjoining inexpensive land, mostly wetlands that lack development value. He also anticipates it will be “a many-year process” of holding the land while he seeks a conservation or permanent conservancy or state home for the land.

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