

**Island parcel to join preserve  
Causeway is called ecological treasure**

**By Gareth McGrath**

**Mar. 29, 2003**

LELAND - It's an area that's full of mosquitoes and ducks, is prone to flooding, is too wet to build on and is only accessible by kayak. In other words, the shoe-shaped parcel that brushes up on both sides of the U.S. 17-74-76 causeway on Eagles Island is an ecological jewel that deserves protection. That was the message Friday from the New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District and the town of Leland. Both groups put up \$60,000 - for a total of \$120,000 - to purchase the 158-acre undeveloped tract from Ocean Isle Beach resident George Madison.

For Soil and Water, the land offers an opportunity to expand upon an adjacent 58-acre conservation area donated to the district by hotelier and restaurateur Whitey Prevatte last year. For Leland, the parcel has officials thinking about the town becoming more than a pit stop for tourists headed to the beach or downtown Wilmington. And for the birds and animals running out of habitat across coastal North Carolina, the wetlands offer them a protected respite between Wilmington and the rapidly expanding bedroom communities in northeast Brunswick County. "Hopefully what this means is that what's out there now is the way it's going to look forever," said Marilyn Stowell, county Soil and Water district conservationist.

Most of the property lies just north of the U.S. 74-76 causeway connecting Wilmington and Leland. A sliver of land also extends south of the highway. While almost all of the land is considered too wet to be developed under today's rules, Ms. Stowell said regulations have a habit of changing. "This removes that potential," she said, noting that the parcel's large amount of frontage along U.S. 17-74-76 means there's now no chance of billboards scarring the landscape. Past attempts by man to manipulate the island still remain, ranging from the rice paddies and associated canals to an old sand borrow pit near the U.S. 421/U.S. 74-76 interchange. The Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the southern half of the island, also uses its property for disposal of material dredged from the Cape Fear River.

Ms. Stowell said Soil and Water relied on donations to come up with its \$60,000. Leland is using money from its general fund and dipping into savings for its share of the purchase price. Leland Councilwoman Jane Gilbert said the town intends to annex both Soil and Water properties and extend a conservation overlay district onto them. Like Ms. Stowell, Ms. Gilbert said she sees the protected area as a potential educational and "green" tourism area, especially for passive activities like kayaking and bird watching.

"This gives Leland an opportunity to become involved in tourism, which is a good thing," she said.

Ms. Gilbert said she envisions kayakers launching at the Battleship North Carolina, paddling through the wetlands and Alligator Creek before making landfall along Leland's Sturgeon Creek. With two large parcels now protected and a bunch of adjacent areas on Eagles Island already owned by other governmental entities, Ms. Stowell said she sees an opportunity to establish a much larger protected area. Convince the island's private property owners to get involved and it could become an island-wide conservation refuge.

But one step - or one paddle - at a time, Ms. Stowell said.

Still, it was that idea of saving the land for future generations that intrigued Mr. Madison about working with the government agencies - even if he could have made more money working with a more traditional buyer. "This is definitely one of the best deals I've been involved in," he said. "It really is that proverbial win-win."

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**A quiet reminder of our heritage**  
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Thanks to the town of Leland, Whitey Prevatte and contributions to the New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District, the causeway between the battleship and the Brunswick River should stay pretty much the way it has always been.

Peaceful.

It also will stay a refuge for wildlife - which can use it, considering the rapid disappearance of woods and wetlands in Southeast North Carolina.

The town and the district each put up \$60,000 to buy 158 acres. Mr. Prevatte already gave 58 acres. Most of the land isn't suitable for development, but politics or technology might change that one day. The joint purchase should keep the land unspoiled.

As such, it will remain a place for touring birds, lurking animals and paddling people. And for those who merely pass in cars, it will be a reminder of how the low country looked before Europeans arrived to sow it with plantations, paddies, ports, plats and pavements.

## **Common Sense: Restaurant owner donates island land for conservation Aug. 25, 2002**

Soil and Water Conservation Board is one of those little political races most of us hardly notice unless we know someone who's running. You never see any mudslinging or the kind of campaign wrongdoing that might plague, say, a run for state agriculture commissioner. But the Soil and Water Conservation District office where Marilyn Stowell and Shelly Miller work is quietly making solid contributions to New Hanover County, and a gift from a local businessman has them delighted. Ms. Stowell is district conservationist, a role she also fills in Pender County. Ms. Miller, a recent University of North Carolina at Wilmington graduate, is community conservationist, which involves a lot of education and outreach. Most soil and water conservation districts advise farmers. It all started with a guy named Hugh Hammond Bennett, the "father of soil and water conservation," who grew up on a cotton farm near Wadesboro. His ideas came into their own after poor farming practices turned vast regions of Oklahoma and other states into the Dust Bowl during the Depression. He became the first director of what is now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, a government agency that works to sustain natural resources.

### What they do

There aren't many farmers in New Hanover County. Instead, the soil and water district is developing ways to help landowners create vegetative buffers along creeks. It has designed a model agricultural chemical handling building for the Horticultural Crop Research Station at Castle Hayne, and advises county planners on sediment and erosion control. The district helps Airlie Gardens expose eighth-graders to things horticultural and conducts an annual outing for New Hanover High School ninth-graders. But the most fun thing going on in the little office these days is planning what to do with 53 acres of land on Eagles Island that Whitey Prevatte donated. Mr. Prevatte owns a motel and restaurant on Market Street at Kerr Avenue. He was out of town last week, but his son Mike said he owned the Battleship Drive-In across the road from the Battleship North Carolina back in the 1960s. His wife, Betty, managed the stand. Hungry folks parked under canopies and walked up to the window to order hamburgers, hot dogs and milkshakes. "My brother and I used to go out and catch turtles and play in that swampy area around there," Mike Prevatte said. When the state built the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge in 1969 and reconfigured the highway, the stand was too close to the road. It had to go.

### What they got

Mr. Prevatte transferred the 53 acres to the S&W district in May. It includes a 27-acre "borrow pit" where highway builders took sand to build up the roads. It's a nice pond now. You could catch a glimpse of it by looking backward as you drive toward Leland, but you'd probably wreck your car. It's accessible by boat and is a

popular spot for fishermen, Ms. Stowell said. The district plans to turn it into an education wildlife sanctuary, taking kids out for boat rides and maybe building a boardwalk across the marsh. Ms. Stowell wants to work with other Eagles Island landowners to expand the public wildlife area. Its neighbors are the state Department of Transportation and the Army Corps of Engineers. International Paper also owns land there, she said. Someday the island could become an eco-tourism attraction, she said, offering people a chance to visit an unspoiled wildlife habitat not 60 seconds from downtown as the egret flies.

What they need

For now, the district could use a john boat to get around the lake. It already has a motor. For more information or to donate a boat, call 762-6072.

"Common Sense" appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. Contact Si Cantwell at 343-2364 or [si.cantwell@wilmingtonstar.com](mailto:si.cantwell@wilmingtonstar.com)

**A walk on the wild side within reach of the city**  
**Article published Dec 19, 2002**

Last August I set out to write a column about the race for Soil and Water Conservation Board supervisors. I figured I'd get a funny little piece about an election for an obscure post. It turned out the story was better than I figured. David Greene, a member of the board, had persuaded his friend, hotelier and restaurateur Whitey Prevatte, to donate 53 acres on Eagles Island. Good people doing good things.

Now comes another chapter of the story. If a fund-raising challenge can be met, a wonderful wildlife resource could be located just minutes from downtown Wilmington. The district has made an offer to buy 158 acres of land on Eagles Island just across a creek from the Prevatte land. The \$120,000 offer has been accepted. "Now we just need to get the money," said Marilyn Stowell, our Soil and Water district conservationist.

It's not quite as hard as it sounds. An anonymous donor has agreed to match, dollar for dollar, any money raised. So the target is \$60,000. The district has 90 days to raise it.

It needs to raise the money by mid-March to close on time, said Paul Nelson of Network Realty, who is brokering the deal. Ms. Stowell said Mr. Nelson deserves a lot of the credit for making this happen, if it happens. He got the listing from the seller, George Madison of Southport, who has agreed to give \$5,000 of the price to the conservancy's endowment fund and help with the environmental study. A member of Cape Fear River Watch, he saw the green potential of the land immediately and pitched the idea of buying it to River Watch, which referred him to the Soil and Water people.

The land is wetlands. You can't build on it. So why buy it? "Because wetlands laws can change," Ms. Stowell said. "If the laws changed and suddenly you can build on a wetland, think what would be built on that island." The price is lower now than it would be if the land were attractive to developers. And another big reason to buy it is so the public can use it.

Ms. Stowell wants to combine the Prevatte tract with the new one to form a wildlife refuge of more than 200 acres available to canoes and small boats. She envisions an educational boardwalk leading out into the creek and marsh. In fact, she's hoping to persuade other landowners on Eagles Island to join together to form a large protected area. They include the Army Corps of Engineers, which is adding dredge material to the south end of the island, the state Department of Transportation, which uses undeveloped wetlands to the north as mitigation land to trade when wetlands must be disturbed for highways,

and International Paper.

Eagles Island was named not for birds, but for a family named Eagles, said Bill Hart, who was elected a Soil and Water supervisor last month. And Eagles Island is not home to any eagles, said Walker Golder, deputy director of Audubon North Carolina. But lots of ospreys nest atop dead trees there. You can see one near the creek as you drive on U.S. 74-76 toward Leland, he said.

There are also many marsh birds such as rails, stately wading birds, a few songbirds and various types of ducks that fly in for the winter. Mr. Hart said a fisherman once said he liked to anchor near the confluence of the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers because at some times of day he could catch freshwater fish, and when the tide changed he could hook saltwater varieties. Eco-tourism - visiting wildlife areas and taking only pictures, leaving only footprints - is a growth industry. Located a few hundred yards from Water Street, this purchase could be a wonderful opportunity for New Hanover and Brunswick counties, if the money can be raised in time. Donations are tax-deductible.

Call Mr. Nelson at home, 254-1489, or e-mail him at [pgn@bellsouth.net](mailto:pgn@bellsouth.net). Visit the online "Common Sense" forum via [www.starnewsonline.com/cantwell](http://www.starnewsonline.com/cantwell). Contact Si Cantwell at 343-2364 or [si.cantwell@wilmingtonstar.com](mailto:si.cantwell@wilmingtonstar.com)