



Kaine discusses proposal to conserve 400,000 acres by 2010

By Scott Harper

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NASSAWADOX - Last month Gov. Timothy M. Kaine announced his intention to conserve more land than any governor before him, 400,000 acres by 2010. On Wednesday, during a swing through the Eastern Shore, he explained how he plans to do it.

The biggest tool, Kaine said, will not be outright state purchases of forests and farmland coveted by developers; Virginia could never afford such an expense, though it intends to do some buying.

Instead, the state will borrow a formula from an environmental group, The Nature Conservancy, by more aggressively offering tax incentives to private landowners in exchange for "conservation easement" agreements that they keep their properties pristine, the governor said.

"The sense that nature is bountiful and limitless is just no longer the case," Kaine said during a speech at The Nature Conservancy's headquarters on the Eastern Shore, in Nassawadox.

With a sprawling seaside marsh as a backdrop, Kaine said preserving open space is "absolutely critical" to controlling runaway growth, as well as improving water quality in the Chesapeake Bay and air quality across the state.

Forests, farmland and marshes trap pollutants and dirt before they can wash off the land and foul waterways, and retaining trees and greenery encourages cleaner air, especially when the alternative is more roads, concrete and fuel emissions, Kaine said.

The governor's words won applause from a small gathering of supporters and landowners invited to Wednesday's event. But his message is likely to run into stiff opposition in a state where government involvement in private-property decisions has never been politically popular and where money for land-conservation efforts has been scarce.

Unlike many other states, Virginia does not have a permanent fund dedicated to buying and preserving ecologically sensitive lands. Moves to create such a fund have been defeated in the past and were shelved again this year in favor of a pledge to study the issue.

Michael Lipford, Virginia director of The Nature Conservancy, said the state is running out of time - and land - to better balance conservation and economic growth. That's especially

true on the Eastern Shore, where the environmental group is racing with private real estate interests to control the future of swaths of waterfront property.

Kaine's 400,000-acre goal "could not come at a more important and critical time," Lipford said.

The conservancy already is helping the state with two land projects. It is holding 4,900 acres of piney forest in Sussex County, on the western fringes of Hampton Roads. The state wants to buy the tract for \$7.2 million. The money is included in this year's proposed state budget, and the land is supposed to become a state forest, said Bob Bloxom, Kaine's secretary of agriculture and forestry.

In addition, the conservancy has acquired the rights to Brumley Mountain, a wilderness area in southwestern Virginia that the state, too, intends to purchase and protect for

\$3.6 million, Bloxom said.

The governor said local land trusts, which negotiate conservation agreements with property owners, also will play a role in meeting the goal. The Virginia Eastern Shore Land Trust was launched in 2003 and so far has helped to preserve more than 4,200 acres in Northampton and Accomack counties, said Peter Henderson, its executive director.

Asked if 400,000 acres is a realistic goal, Bloxom did not hesitate.

"Sure, it's doable," he said.

If so, Bloxom's own family farm, encompassing 146 acres on the Eastern Shore, will be part of that total. The former Republican state delegate negotiated a conservation easement on the farm about two years ago.

"It's something I wanted to do," he said, "and it was a smart thing to do."