

County officials delay release of public records related to McDonald Farm for months

September 6, 2025 by [Joan McClane](#)



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In December, the Chattanooga Times Free Press requested public records from Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp's office related to McDonald Farm — which residents have been fighting to preserve from industrial development.

It took eight months for any records to be released and now — with a key planning vote coming Monday — a core set of records involving Wamp himself and his top planning aide have yet to be handed over.

State law requires public records to be available for inspection by residents during normal business

hours. More complex requests sometimes take a few days or even weeks to fill. But an eight-month delay is out of the norm.

A similar request to the city of Chattanooga in April, for emails between local planning officials and county staff related to McDonald Farm, was answered with hundreds of pages of lightly redacted public documents in 15 business days.

Another request in June, for correspondence between Wamp and Tennessee Commissioner of Economic and Community Development Stuart McWhorter, was fulfilled by state officials in 30 business days.

Haley Burton, a spokesperson for the Mayor's Office, said in a statement Friday that concerns about previous failures to respond to public records requests should be directed to former County Attorney Rheubin Taylor, who left office in June.

"Open records requests were managed solely under the direction and guidance" of Taylor, the statement said. "The Times Free Press request regarding McDonald Farm, in particular, went unresolved for months under that system."

Taylor told the Times Free Press on Friday that he could not ethically comment for the story.

Wamp, a Republican, unsuccessfully sought to fire Taylor, a Democrat, at the beginning of his term in 2022. Taylor left office at the end of his term in June and Wamp's pick for county attorney, Janie Varnell, took over two months ago in July.

If the request was for records in possession of the Mayor's Office, ultimately the Mayor's Office would be responsible for releasing the records or denying the request, Deborah Fisher, executive director of the Tennessee Coalition for Open Government, told the Times Free Press, which is a member of the coalition.

VOTE PENDING

A reporter was allowed to review some of Hamilton County's records last month, after the Times Free Press began reporting a story on the delay in the records release. Editor Alison Gerber wrote Varnell asking for her office to expedite the delivery of the records. She referenced the upcoming Planning Commission vote on the Plan Hamilton regional blueprint, with implications for McDonald Farm's future.

Wamp's text messages and emails, and the text messages of Nathan Janeway, who Wamp appointed head of McDonald Farm development, have not been provided.

Those, and other staff communications regarding McDonald Farm, the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce and industrial development, were initially requested on Dec. 20, 2024.

Varnell told the Times Free Press on Aug. 7 that she'd advised Wamp's Chief of Staff Claire McVay, the custodian for the Mayor's Office, and other records custodians to fulfill the larger public records request on July 25.

McVay "anticipated 15-20 business days to complete the request due to the volume of communication we have to go through," Varnell wrote, which would have pushed the release of the documents until just before the expected Plan Hamilton vote.



At the beginning of January, McVay had said she anticipated being able to provide responsive documents in 10 to 15 business days. Later in January, she said she anticipated being able to fulfill the request within five business days.

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Burton told the Times Free Press that the discrepancies in estimated times was related to the availability of staff. An IT employee was off that week, she said.

'INFLATE THE COST'

McVay was seeking to charge \$432 for inspection of the records until the beginning of August, when the Tennessee Office of Open Records Counsel told Varnell that inspection had to be provided at no charge, per state law.

Some of the county records released last month show McVay acknowledged that the cost might stall the records delivery.

In December of 2024, McVay wrote three county staff members including Hamilton County Chief Operating Officer David Roddy an email, saying that she'd sent the estimate to the Times Free Press.

"So it probably slowed this request down in its tracks," McVay said. "You're all copied on it."

Tennessee's public records law says records custodians are expected to make records available promptly and explicitly states that excessive fees should not be used to hinder public access to records.

"This appears to be a classic case of trying to prevent certain information from becoming public by delaying fulfillment of a public records request," Fisher said. "The communication by the county mayor's chief of staff about slowing the public records request down 'in its tracks' by charging \$432 to inspect documents flies in the face of well-settled law that there can be no charge for inspection. This is disappointing all around."

Fisher said the public doesn't want games played.

"They just want government entities to comply with the public records law," she said. "Maybe it was a large request, but there's a big difference between 15 days that the county estimated in January and the more than eight months that have now passed."

This is an example of why it is so important to keep free inspection of records in the law in Tennessee, Fisher added.

"Otherwise, public officials who don't want you to see something will simply inflate the cost of copies of the records — something we already pay for in taxes — as a way of discouraging people from getting what is public information," she said.

MEMO INCLUDED

In 2021, Hamilton County officials purchased the sprawling North County farm from the family of longtime Chattanooga Free Press Publisher Roy McDonald for industrial development for \$16 million. Those plans began to unravel toward the end of last year.

An out-of-town economic development consultant presented research to the Hamilton County Commission showing agritourism as the best use of the farm, surprising many, including leaders at the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce who'd hoped to soon be recruiting manufacturers.

Wamp has supported the agritourism proposal — backed by an organized group of local residents — but he has not ruled out the possibility of future industrial development on the land.

The Republican majority County Commission has also remained noncommittal, having yet to address the property's zoning.

Meanwhile, the fate of the long-debated and highly contentious county growth plan that will guide future development in unincorporated Hamilton County, including the farm, hangs in the balance, and on the horizon next year's primary and general election contests loom large.

([READ MORE: Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce memo stresses manufacturing in Plan Hamilton](#))

In June, the Times Free Press reported that city records showed Wamp agreed to include a memo written by the Chattanooga Area of Chamber of Commerce arguing for "the urgent need for new manufacturing locations in Hamilton County" in a recent version of Plan Hamilton that went before the County Commission for a vote earlier this summer but was tabled during one of the most packed and tense County Commission meetings this year.

City records showed the chamber wanted the memo to keep the door open for potential industrial development at the farm.

The emails also showed the chamber had to pass on a state inquiry that may have led to a \$3 billion investment and more than 1,000 new jobs because county-owned land hasn't been readied for industrial recruitment.

When county commissioners questioned Wamp about the potentially missed opportunity, Wamp stressed his close contact with McWhorter, the Tennessee commissioner of economic and community development.

'FRIENDS'

State records obtained by the Times Free Press show the chamber was asked to submit proposals for several projects that the state could not accommodate due to a lack of viable industrial sites.

A few industrial projects that may have been a good fit for McDonald Farm were a Smith and Wesson headquarters/manufacturing plant, estimating 620 jobs and a \$125 million investment, a Polaris inquiry estimating 2,000 jobs and a \$127 million investment, and an LG Chem inquiry estimating 860 jobs and a \$3.2 billion investment, according to the state records released promptly this summer.

The state included a spreadsheet of 26 companies listed as "Projects We Didn't Submit on Due to Acreage Requirements" between July 2022 and February 2024. The list totalled more than \$9 billion in potential investment.

The information was exchanged between Wamp and McWhorter before the 2024 Planning Commission vote to rezone part of the farm for manufacturing use, which triggered public outcry.

State records show Wamp texted McWhorter once about McDonald Farm, in September 2024.

"Great seeing you at your fundraiser," McWhorter wrote Wamp, who replied that it had meant a lot that McWhorter came.

Wamp then told McWhorter that he thought State Sen. Bo Watson, R-North Chattanooga, had mentioned to him a grant application that the county had in for the farm for about \$1 million, the state records show.

"It would be a big deal for us because it would allow us to invest into the homestead, which we plan on being the anchor of all economic activity there," Wamp wrote McWhorter. "It's an incredibly historic site and it would be the first real public asset in that community and would serve Rhea County, as much as Hamilton.

"You mentioned that ECD sees value in recreation investments adjacent to economic development opportunities," Wamp added. "Forgive my shameless plug."

The county is now working, through a state grant, to run an industrial water line out to McDonald Farm, which county officials say is to support the revived annual Hamilton County Fair.

Chris O'Brien, a spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, said some texts and emails between Wamp and McWhorter were withheld or redacted "due to the fact they include projects that are not contracted."

The state records show Wamp was also advocating for the nonprofit Millennial Debt Foundation he

founded before he was elected to public office.



'CLOSE DOOR SESSION'

A month after texting McWhorter about McDonald Farm in 2024, Wamp twice invited McWhorter to a series of Millennial Debt Foundation events called "The Chattanooga Convening."

"We are going to put our out of town guests up at the Edwin at our expense," Wamp told McWhorter. "We are going to have two hour close door session on local and state policy with 30 select leaders, followed by lunch at Nicole and Bo Watson's home. Should I follow up with your assist to see if it's possible for you to come to some or all of it?"

This year, Wamp invited McWhorter to an April gathering, limited to 60 and hosted by the Millennial Debt Foundation, called the "Sine Die Shindig" at the 123o Club in Nashville, to celebrate the end of the 2025 legislative session.

State law says county mayors have to devote full time to the duties of the office, unless voters say otherwise.

When asked about Wamp's efforts to bring McWhorter to the nonprofit's events during the county's regular business hours, Burton, Wamp's press secretary, provided a statement.

"Mayor Wamp and Commissioner McWhorter have been personal friends for years," the statement said. "The Mayor and Commissioner frequently discuss sensitive economic development issues by phone and in person. As friends often do, Mayor Wamp has invited Commissioner McWhorter to events by text message. Mayor Wamp is an unpaid board member of the nonprofit Millennial Debt Foundation, and his involvement is typically limited to participation in the organization's events."

Then, Wamp and McWhorter made plans in May to meet, so Wamp could present "a big proposal" that he said Watson was behind, the records show.

Burton said they can't confirm or deny that the proposal was related to McDonald Farm.

Not long after, in June, two days after the Times Free Press published a story detailing the chamber memo related to McDonald Farm and the same day Plan Hamilton went off the rails at the weekly County Commission meeting, Wamp texted McWhorter to give him a call.

"Would like to give you an update on some dynamics here you need to be aware of," Wamp told McWhorter.

"Did you also tell me there was an article?" McWhorter texted back after they'd talked. "If so, can you send."

In August, the Times Free Press asked McWhorter if he thought, considering the state's stated need for industrial space, that McDonald Farm should be zoned for light industry, versus heavy industry, and if Wamp has been advocating for a light industry plan when he presented a proposal to McWhorter in May. McWhorter responded with a statement.

"In regard to McDonald Farm and any other similar circumstance at the local level, it is at the discretion of our local partners to decide how they want to develop land and sites in their communities," McWhorter's statement said.

FEES

The Times Free Press first requested county staff and county commissioners emails and texts related to McDonald Farm in the fall of 2024, after the economic development consultant Randall Gross told county commissioners that industrial development was not a best use for McDonald Farm.

County commissioners responded to the request within several weeks. Commissioner David Sharpe, D-

Red Bank, and Steve Highlander, R-Harrison, sent responsive documents. The rest said they had no responsive records to provide.

Commissioners are the legal custodians of their own records, such as text messages on their phones, but the county IT department has the capability to search the county's entire email system for key words, like McDonald Farm, producing rapid results, previous county records request have shown.

One of the first things Wamp did as county mayor in 2022 was ask the Hamilton County Public Records Commission to change its policy so county email was kept a minimum of five years.

In December of 2024, McVay, the records custodian for the Mayor's Office, responded to the Times Free Press, citing a cost of \$359 for 8 hours of labor to retrieve, compile and redact the records.

After the Times Free Press withdrew that request and filed a different one in December of 2024 — to inspect emails and texts related to McDonald Farm sent between county staff — McVay cited a cost of \$432 for inspection.

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In March, the Times Free Press sent a 2010 legal opinion by the state's open records counsel to McVay that showed public inspection of records must be free of charge.

"It is my understanding that the county may charge for the labor required to compile records and make redactions prior to inspection," McVay said in an email in March. "I have copied Dana Beltramo, the county's public records coordinator, to verify that."

Beltramo replied saying that according to the county's public records policy, "Hamilton County may charge for the work done to prepare records for inspection. The custodian may also elect to waive fees."

The word "may" was in bold, italics and underlined in both cases.

"As to the cost of preparing records for inspection," Beltramo went on, "if the requested records contain information that Hamilton County is required by law to redact, such as driver's license numbers, SSN, bank account numbers, etc., the records must be redacted before being inspected," citing the county's policy.

The word "if" was also in bold, italics and underlined.

State law provides few reasons for redaction, such as Social Security numbers and other identifying personal information, in the case of general county government, and the public records statute requires

the legal justification for redaction to be given.

In many cases the county records released and reviewed by the Times Free Press in August were heavily redacted. An entire email between chamber officials and county staff was blacked out in one case, but Varnell said it was related to the Hamilton County Fair, not industrial development.

Varnell said that email was redacted due to attorney-client privilege and others were redacted because of a law that passed in 2017, which updated Tennessee's public records laws concerning economic development deals.

The law was proposed because local governments were facing pushback about withholding information about economic development deals until after a vote occurred, but the final statute made exceptions.

Those include some chamber conversations with county leaders about McDonald Farm, before a deal is sealed, Varnell said.

The statement from the Mayor's Office said that Varnell has "handled these requests with urgency and transparency, devoting more than 70 hours to properly complete this request."

Contact projects editor Joan McClane at jmcclane@timesfreepress.com or [423-757-6601](tel:423-757-6601).

Note: This story was updated Sept. 8 to correct the reason for redaction of one email record.

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Joan McClane is two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist who has led enterprise reporting efforts at the Times Free Press for a decade. McClane earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in journalism from the University of Alabama and has covered business, education, the court system, government and nonprofits since joining the newspaper's staff in 2007.

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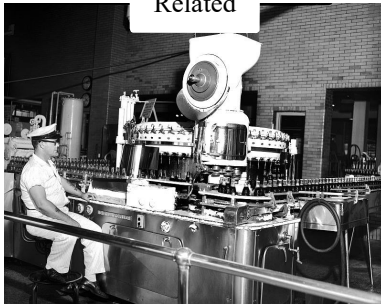
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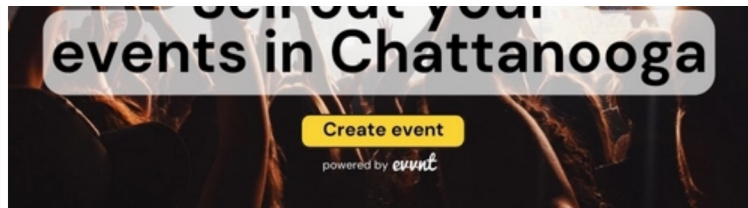


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Hamilton County pushing Enterprise South, McDonald Farm land swap

October 8, 2025 by [Joan McClane](#)



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Chattanooga and Hamilton County leaders are working to cement a deal that would allow industrial development on part of the nature park land at Enterprise South while moving part of the county-owned McDonald Farm into park status.

The deal would preserve farmland near the Cumberland Trail, and it's unclear whether it would leave potential for future industrial development at the 2,100-acre property on the Hamilton/Rhea County line.

Three local leaders with direct knowledge of the county-proposed swap confirmed the proposed deal, which would eventually have to be publicly discussed and voted on by city and county officials. These

leaders spoke to the Chattanooga Times Free Press on the condition of anonymity to describe internal deliberations.

([READ MORE: Land swap rules out industry at McDonald Farm, promises growth at Enterprise South](#))

Ultimately, the National Park Service would have to approve the agreement. When the city and county began acquisition of the former military site in the late 1990s, the federal government placed restrictions on the 2,800-acre Enterprise South Nature Park property requiring federal approval for any change in land use.

Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp — the driver behind the swap — traveled to Nashville over the summer to pitch the idea to then-Tennessee Commissioner of Economic and Community Development Stuart McWhorter, according to two people familiar with the matter.

([READ MORE: Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce memo stresses manufacturing in Plan Hamilton](#))

In text messages reported by [the Times Free Press](#) in September, Wamp told McWhorter he wanted to make "a big proposal," with the blessing of state Sen. Bo Watson, R-North Chattanooga. Wamp's spokesperson said in September that the mayor's office couldn't confirm or deny that the meeting was about McDonald Farm.

Offered repeated opportunities to comment for this story starting on Monday morning, Wamp's office had not done so by Wednesday morning.

When Hamilton County purchased the Sale Creek property of former Chattanooga Free Press owner Roy McDonald's family in 2021 for \$16 million under former Mayor Jim Coppinger for the purpose of industrial development, officials said the plan was to turn a large portion of the property, considered undevelopable, into a park.

Photo Gallery

[Hamilton County pushing Enterprise South, McDonald Farm land swap](#)





The same had been done when county officials led the redevelopment of the former U.S. Army ammunition plant into Enterprise South Industrial Park, which helped lure Volkswagen to Chattanooga in 2008.

The former Army land covers 6,000 acres near Ooltewah and Apison. Of that, the Enterprise South Industrial Park, where VW remains housed, encompasses 1,200 acres. The remaining land includes the 2,800 acre Enterprise South Nature Park.

Plans to move forward with rezoning part of McDonald Farm for industrial use were upended toward the end of last year when an economic development consultant presented research to the Hamilton County Commission showing agritourism, not industry, as the best use of the farm.

Wamp has supported the agritourism proposal — backed by an organized group of local residents — but he has not ruled out the possibility of future industrial development on the land.

The County Commission has also remained noncommittal, having yet to address the property's zoning.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce have continued to push for the county to follow through with its original plan to use the land to draw more jobs to the area and residents have asked for the entire property to be protected from development.

Public records have shown that Wamp agreed to include a Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce memo urging more industrial sites in the final version of Plan Hamilton, the hotly debated and much anticipated growth road map for the unincorporated parts of the county that was recently approved by the Hamilton County Planning Commission.

The final result has been criticized by many of the residents who participated in the years-long effort to draft Plan Hamilton and have said last minute changes emphasizing density and industry undermined the public planning process.

It is unclear how many acres of the county-owned McDonald Farm and the city/county operated Enterprise South will be exchanged, but the value of the McDonald Farm land and the Enterprise South Nature Park land may differ and may not result in an acre-for-acre swap.

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A state report has said there were really only three areas of the farm, all less than 120 acres, that could be realistically readied for industrial recruits. Those spots are on the parts of the McDonald Farm property near the roads and rail line, and it is unclear if the final swap proposal will encompass any of the areas identified as prime for industry.

Last year, another land swap near McDonald Farm connected another section of the Cumberland Trail, segments of which stretch across 11 Tennessee counties along the Cumberland Plateau. Almost 40 miles of the trail remain to be constructed, once the land necessary to connect the existing segments is acquired by the state.

The land exchange last year involved two properties that were once part of Audubon Mountain, a 465-acre hardwood forest donated by David Gray in 1984 to the Chattanooga Audubon Society, which later sold a portion of the property to Tennessee State Parks.

The state agency swapped that 110-acre portion, at the base of the mountain on Coulterville Road, for a 115-acre piece of land owned by the Audubon Society at the higher elevation of the property next to the Upper Leggett Road Trailhead of the Cumberland Trail.

At the time of the announcement, county and Audubon society officials said that deal had provided the

opportunity to connect the Cumberland Trail right into McDonald Farm's backyard.

Contact projects editor Joan McClane at jmcclane@timesfreepress.com or [423-757-6601](tel:423-757-6601).

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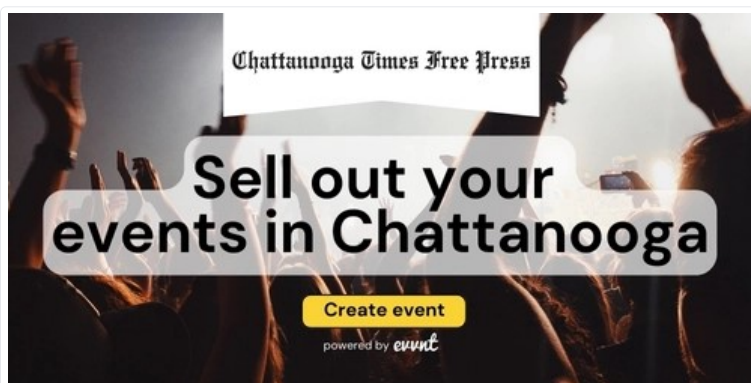


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Land swap rules out industry at McDonald Farm, promises growth at Enterprise South

October 8, 2025 by [Ellen Gerst](#)



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Watch on

A land swap announced Wednesday will end the possibility of industrial development at McDonald Farm, Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp said.

"We believe that we've identified a path to save McDonald Farm, to preserve it for generations to come," Wamp said at a press conference Wednesday, "but also to expand one of the great industrial parks in the South."

The swap, [first reported by the Chattanooga Times Free Press](#) on Wednesday morning, will trade land designations between the Sale Creek farm and the Enterprise South Nature Park in the Ooltewah area, allowing more development and job creation at that site, adjacent to Chattanooga's Volkswagen facility.

Wamp told reporters he had not intended to inform the public of the plans until later, but he called the press conference on Wednesday because the Times Free Press was moving forward with a story about the land swap.

([READ MORE: Sales of Volkswagen's Chattanooga-made ID.4 jump 176%](#))

Plans call for around 600 acres at Enterprise South to be opened to future development in exchange for preserving around 1,300 acres of McDonald Farm, Wamp said.

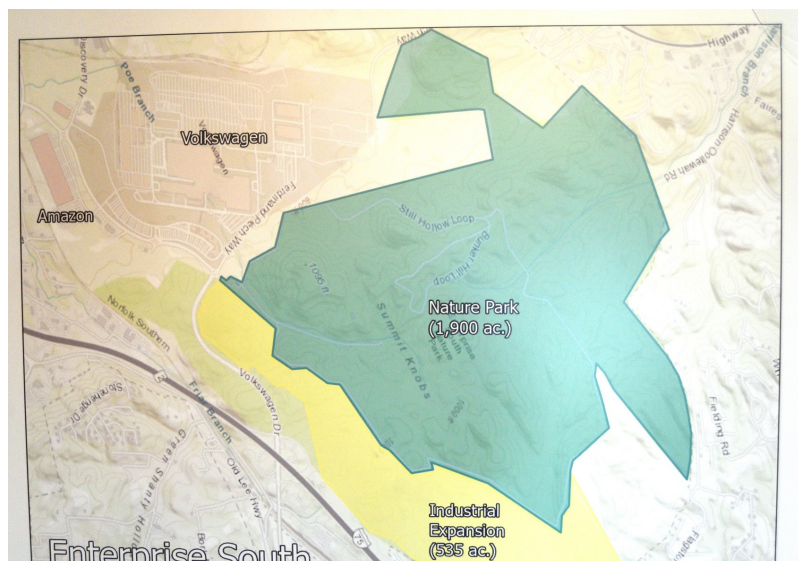
"It's a part of the farm that ties in directly to the Cumberland Trail, a great asset in our community, and one the state takes very seriously," he said.

A survey over the summer found residents wanted to see McDonald Farm preserved and used for recreation instead of industry or homes.

"That is an economic activation in a rural setting that's appropriate, and it's what the community in Sale Creek wants," Wamp said.

Photo Gallery

Land swap ends industry hopes for McDonald Farm, promises growth at Enterprise South





The section of Enterprise South to be earmarked for development is outside the park's main trail system, so visitors likely wouldn't notice a difference, Wamp said.

That site already has the infrastructure in place to support industry, he said, while at McDonald Farm, it would take hundreds of millions of dollars to make the land viable for industrial use.

Wamp said there's been around eight months of intense coordination on the swap, between local governments and the federal Department of the Interior. That department oversees a National Park Service program that the county plans to apply for in the next weeks and months, Wamp said.

"Before we got hopes up at a local level, we wanted to check in at the national parks level," Wamp said. "We got positive feedback."

Media outlets were allowed to ask questions of Wamp and other officials Wednesday, but a county spokesperson, Haley Burton, said before the press conference that no questions from the Chattanooga Times Free Press would be answered. Burton also later declined to answer questions about the total acreage in the swap, planned uses for the land and the timeline moving forward.

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The deal has earned letters of support from officials including Gov. Bill Lee, U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., and U.S. Rep. Chuck Fleischmann, R-Ooltewah, Wamp said.

Hamilton County owns the Enterprise South property jointly with Chattanooga, after acquiring the former military site in stages beginning 25 years ago.

Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly said the swap gives the city the chance to chase new jobs while maintaining its commitment to public lands.

"One of the biggest economic development challenges facing Chattanooga right now is a lack of

developable land for large employers," Kelly said in a statement. "If we want to grow our economy and give more Chattanoogaans access to opportunity, we need to be able to recruit major projects."

The farm was owned by the family of the late former owner of the Chattanooga Free Press, Roy McDonald. The county bought the farm in 2021 for \$16 million, with talk of a possible industrial site alongside parkland. Since then, county leaders have said the cost to bring a large employer to the site, which lacks sewer access, would be prohibitively high.

([READ MORE: Hamilton County Mayor Wamp says \\$3 billion project not realistic for McDonald Farm](#))

"McDonald Farm was purchased probably without a strategic plan," Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison, said at the press conference at the County Courthouse.

Maps showing the proposed "highest and best use" for both sites flanked officials on Wednesday.

The 240-acre portion of the farm that's hosted the Hamilton County Fair since its reintroduction in 2023, between the rail line and Highway 27, was labeled for "festivals, weddings and retreats." Across the railway, the 1,300 acres involved in the land swap was marked "preserve."

A 140-acre section to the north was marked "future services." When asked, Burton did not say what future services could mean.

On the map showing Enterprise South, a 535-acre strip of land just north of Interstate 75 was marked as "industrial expansion," and another 1,900 acres above it kept as a "nature park."

Jim Stewart, executive director of the Chattanooga Audubon Society, said the swap aligns with what residents have said they wanted — to preserve a unique site that's home to plenty of unique flora and fauna.

"It was really a battle between two sides, and it didn't look like any chance of compromise," Stewart said by phone. "There were people who wanted to preserve the whole thing, others who wanted to develop the whole thing. I was always lobbying for some type of compromise."

Last week, deeds were signed on another land swap involving Audubon and Tennessee State Parks near McDonald Farm, which will complete another section of the Cumberland Trail, Stewart said. This next swap would extend that trail system and state park connectivity, he said.

"It's the most beautiful hardwood forests anywhere in this area," Stewart said. "Trees are hundreds of years old in some places. There's creeks flowing through it. It's just a real nature sanctuary. There's black bears that walk through the property...I mean, there's freshwater jellyfish there. I mean, where do

you find stuff like that?"

Contact growth reporter Ellen Gerst at egerst@timesfreepress.com or [423-757-6319](tel:423-757-6319).

Ellen Gerst

egerst@timesfreepress.com



Ellen Gerst is the public editor of the Times Free Press, where she oversees reader feedback, the paper's daily dual opinion pages and Sunday Perspective section. She has covered crime, local news, growth and development since joining the paper in 2022, and previously reported on criminal justice and local government for the Casper Star-Tribune in Wyoming.

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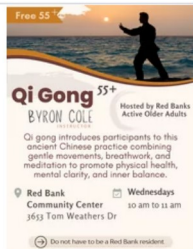
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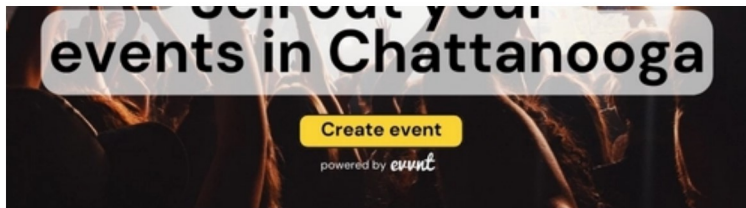


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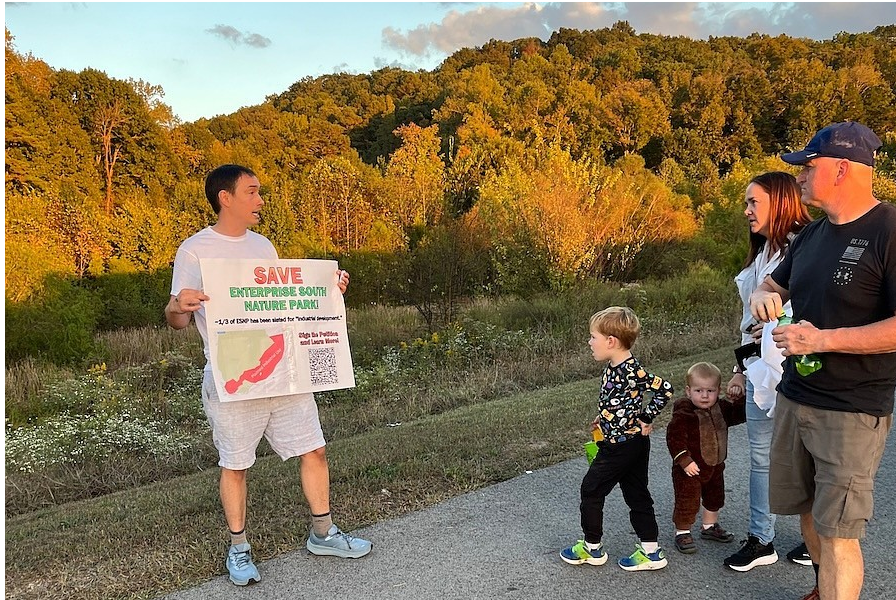
October 10, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#) | Updated October 10, 2025 at 8:34

p.m.



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Opposition is emerging to a proposal by Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp to preserve land at McDonald Farm in Sale Creek by opening up parkland in the Ooltewah area for industrial development.

Under the proposal, about 1,300 acres at the McDonald Farm site once owned by the late Chattanooga Free Press Publisher Roy McDonald would be preserved as open space. Meanwhile, about 600 acres at Enterprise South Nature Park once promised for preservation would be used for industry.

The proposal has ruffled those living close to the nature park, including some who hike and bike regularly on the parcel set aside to be assessed for development.

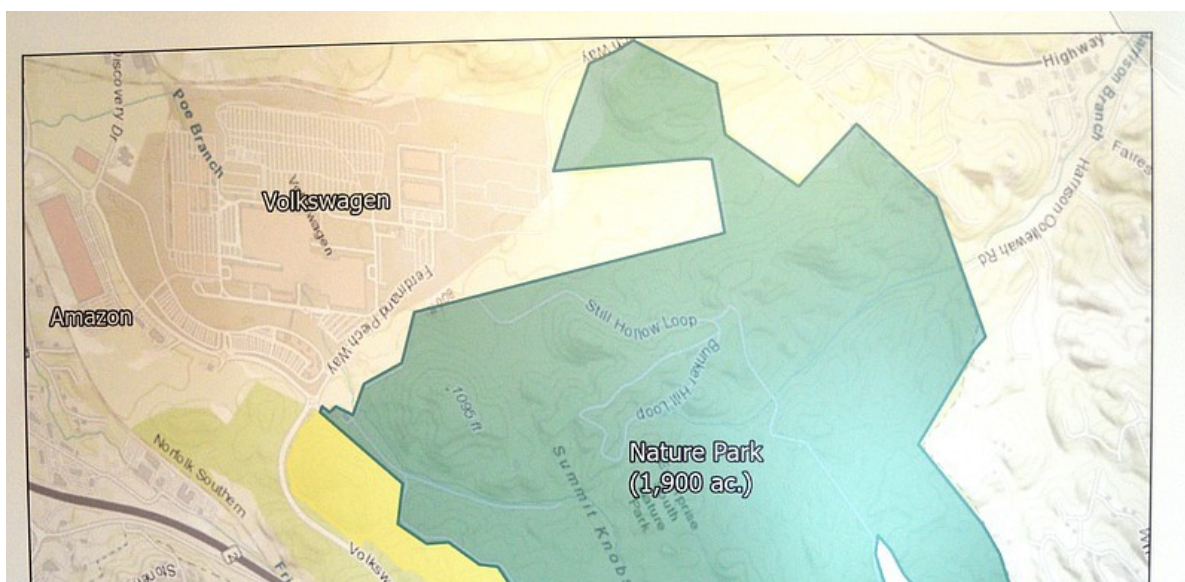
Wamp held a press conference to announce his plan Wednesday after eight months of preparations. He said he called the press conference because the Chattanooga Times Free Press had learned of the proposal and was

planning a story about it. Wamp said he had planned to make the proposal known at an unspecified later date.

A petition started Thursday opposing the industrial development at Enterprise South has gained about 1,000 signatures, 80% of which are from areas in Chattanooga, Collegedale and Red Bank, according to petition organizer Melissa Ray.

"I think it is deeply important for the public to understand that the political framing of this proposed swap as two natural areas pitted against one another (McDonald Farm vs Enterprise South Nature Park) to determine which is more or less worthy of protection is a false choice," Ray wrote in an email. "We deserve the protection of both spaces."

Ray, who grew up in Chattanooga and now lives just outside the city limits near the edge of Ooltewah, walks at Enterprise South several times a week, she said in an interview. It's one of the only paved places she's found surrounded by deep woods, which allows her to push her young children in a stroller, ages 2 and 4, among the trees.





(READ MORE: Survey: Residents want McDonald Farm saved for recreation)

The children both call Enterprise South "home," Ray said, the same way they call their house home. She's also familiar with the parcel carved out for development — she often goes on runs on the Magnolia Loop Trail there, which she said is one of the best trails in the park because it is isolated and quiet.

She doesn't think elected officials actually take petitions into account, she said. Instead, she hopes it will serve as a way to spread the word and unite people who feel the same as she does, she said.

An organization involved in the origin of Enterprise South Nature Park, SORBA Chattanooga, made a statement Friday. SORBA, a mountain bike organization dedicated to advocacy for biking trails, found out about the land swap deal through the news, according to the statement.

"We do wish there had been greater transparency and public engagement in the early stages of this process," said the statement, attributed to the SORBA Chattanooga board of directors.

Enterprise South Nature Park, near Volkswagen, is crisscrossed with bike

trails, with the statement describing it as "one of the most accessible trail systems in our region." The statement directed bikers to contact elected officials and attend upcoming Hamilton County Commission meetings, while also remaining optimistic about McDonald Farm's preservation — it might allow for new trails on the conserved land, the statement said.

(READ MORE: Happy Valley Farm held up as example for agritourism at McDonald Farm)

Wamp said during the Wednesday press conference that future development on the 600-acre parcel would not disturb recreational activities. However, bikers have pointed out on social media that the majority of the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail is included on the county's map outlining the parcel, which is on the southwest side of the nature park.



Shannon Dye regularly rides the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail with her husband, she said. They've lived in East Ridge for about a decade. The Atlas trail is relatively advanced, she said, and it's surrounded by towering pine trees, so someone looking on from the border of the park wouldn't know it was there. The trail holds plenty of memories for her, she said.

"I cannot imagine a bulldozer touching any inch of that trail," Dye said. "It's just punched me right in the gut. It made me sick. It made me afraid of feeling out of control, of what I thought was something that couldn't be touched."

Haley Burton, spokesperson for Wamp, confirmed that the parcel does encompass the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail. If land appraisers end up pointing out that acreage, including the trail, is valuable for development, the county will work on moving the Atlas trail up into the main body of the park and out of the southern end, she said.

And as a whole, the acreage the county puts up for development may shrink to as much as half that amount by the end of the appraisal process, Burton said. It will all depend on whether the land is viable for industry. The process is still in its beginning stages, Burton said.

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The change in land use at the nature park would require federal approval, as the former military property was granted under a land preservation program. Wamp has received positive feedback at the federal level, he said.

Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly also put his support behind the deal Wednesday, saying that it would allow the county to keep recruiting employers to develop and open up jobs, while also holding to conserving land.

Contact government reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.



Siena Duncan

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Siena Duncan reports on the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County for the Times Free Press. She has a degree in journalism from the University of Florida, where she



earned Hearst, Mark of Excellence and Sunshine State awards. When she's not writing, she's attempting to pet her ornery cat Soup or getting lost in the mountains.

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Ooltewah residents concerned historic cemetery will be affected by Enterprise South, McDonald Farm swap

October 18, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



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 Gift Article



Grace Jahnke stumbled upon the gravestones in autumn after sundown while looking for a lost dog — "'Blair Witch' style," she said.

She elected to come back in the morning, rather than follow the path of the protagonists she's seen in horror movies, she said. Once light was breaking through the trees in Hunter Village, her neighborhood in Ooltewah, she walked back down the trail in her backyard for about a mile. There, covered in brush and vines and rusted strips of fallen barbed wire, was Old Summit Cemetery.

Nestled in the middle of the woods between Interstate 75 and the fences of Enterprise South Nature Park, with no through-roads connecting to it, the cemetery is likely older than a century. Jahnke and her neighbors have been formulating a plan to restore it — but now she's concerned it will be affected by a Hamilton County proposal to open up that area to development, involving a plan to preserve 1,300 acres of McDonald Farm in Sale Creek in exchange for a 500-acre rezoning of Enterprise South for industrial use.

Opposition to County Mayor Weston Wamp's proposal has grown since it was announced last week. Wamp had not intended to make the plans public until an unspecified later date, but he scheduled a press conference after the Chattanooga Times Free Press sought his comment for a story revealing the plans.

Photo Gallery

Ooltewah residents concerned historic cemetery will be affected by Enterprise South, McDonald Farm swap





A petition since started by those living in the Ooltewah area had received over 5,000 signatures as of Friday. Residents have expressed frustration with development in the southern part of the county and concern over access to the nature park — the parcel that could be slated for industry includes the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail, and now possibly the Old Summit Cemetery.

Haley Burton, Wamp's spokesperson, said the cemetery will be unaffected by the proposal and will not be disturbed. The cemetery's location in

relation to the parcel that would be slated for industry was unclear as of last week because the Times Free Press only had access to view images of the map on an easel during the press conference. The newspaper has asked for a digital copy of the map and has not yet received it.

Residents familiar with the area say the cemetery is on the affected property. Jahnke remains skeptical despite county assurances.

"Working in medical, the way we do things is that if it's not documented, it didn't happen," said Jahnke, who works in ophthalmology. "I understand that they're saying, 'We're not going to touch it,' but I want to see legal documentation saying, 'If this proceeds, we won't touch this cemetery'... Then it's set in stone."

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor)

Jahnke doesn't want the people buried there to be forgotten, she said, and now it feels like she and her neighbors are on a time crunch to assure that.

The only readily accessible records of the cemetery are logged on the site Find A Grave, where 10 gravestones have been logged over the years by locals who uploaded photos. The location isn't currently recorded on virtual maps, though it used to show up earlier this year, Jahnke said, before disappearing.

The headstones date back to the early 1900s, with several of the birth dates on the headstones in the mid-1800s.

During the fall season, you can only find about half of the logged headstones, alongside a handful of others weathered by time with no legible names and dates — but Jahnke said that during the winter, when the undergrowth dies off, you can see dozens of what she assumes to be unmarked graves encircled by white pebbles.

According to the Tennessee GenWeb Project, part of a volunteer-run effort to record genealogy in the U.S., the cemetery was listed as "Summet Cemetery" in the 1930s by the federal Works Progress Administration, and recorded as a "colored" cemetery. Federal documents at the time said there were over 200 unmarked graves in the area.

Names on the majority of the readable gravestones can be traced back to census records, according to FamilySearch, that show each person's race marked as a number of terms used for Black people in the 20th century: "colored," "negro," "mulatto." None for which the Chattanooga Times Free Press could find records were documented as white.

At least one was alive a couple decades prior to the Civil War: Miles Wilson, born in 1842 in Alabama. He died in Ooltewah in 1928, according to Tennessee death records. His race was marked as Black and his occupation as "laborer." It remains unclear whether he was enslaved at some point during his life.

"I'm one of those people that thinks no one deserves to be forgotten," Jahnke said. "I believe everyone has a story, and I'm curious to know who these people were. That's just a lot of graves to be unmarked."

(READ MORE: Hamilton County mayor's land swap proposal draws opposition)

She's opposed to the idea of the McDonald Farm and Enterprise South deal as a whole, and this adds another layer of concern, she said.

Tennessee law says that interested parties, like a county government or developers who own the land, can file a lawsuit in chancery court to remove human remains and rebury them somewhere else if a grave site is abandoned or neglected. It's a felony to disturb human remains otherwise.

But it would feel wrong to Jahnke to move the remains, she said, considering how old they are. She's worried they could be destroyed in transport, she said.



Still, the silver lining is that more and more people have tried to get in touch with Jahnke about it, she said. Her neighbors are trying to dive into more research about the headstones, and some of them have reached out to places like the Chattanooga African American Museum to see if anyone has the connections or skills to do more for the site.

The Times Free Press reached out to the East Tennessee chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society for comment, and did not receive a response in time for publication.

(READ MORE: 'Enough is enough': Ooltewah area sees most residential growth in Hamilton County in past decade)

Chris Bellows grew up exploring trails in the area near Old Summit Cemetery with his friends. That was back when that portion of I-75 was two lanes and a lot less busy, he said. Now, a constant dull roar from the highway can be heard as visitors walk among the headstones.

Bellows remembers coming across the cemetery when he was around 10 years old in the 1990s, when trees weren't growing in the cemetery itself and the land was more clear. He and his friends could see plenty of headstones back then, he said. Old Summit Cemetery was like a local legend, the biggest of several historic cemeteries dotted across the Enterprise South he used to explore when it was an abandoned ammunition plant, though this is the only one he thinks could be affected by the county's proposal, he said.

He's also unsure of the county's assurance it won't be affected by the deal,

he said. The Atlas trail, confirmed by the county that it's within the parcel slated for development, is just a few miles from the cemetery.

After seeing a number of developments get approval that he thought were careless, he's lost trust in the county government, he said. Sometimes he feels as if this kind of uproar over losing the mountain bike trail should have been there when much larger projects were approved years ago, he said.

"Now it's going over a mountain bike trail, it's getting people's attention," Bellows said. "But I wish the other stuff would've gotten their attention too, because it was worse."

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

Siena Duncan

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Siena Duncan reports on the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County for the Times Free Press. She has a degree in journalism from the University of Florida, where she earned Hearst, Mark of Excellence and Sunshine State awards. When she's not writing, she's attempting to pet her ornery cat Soup or getting lost in the mountains.

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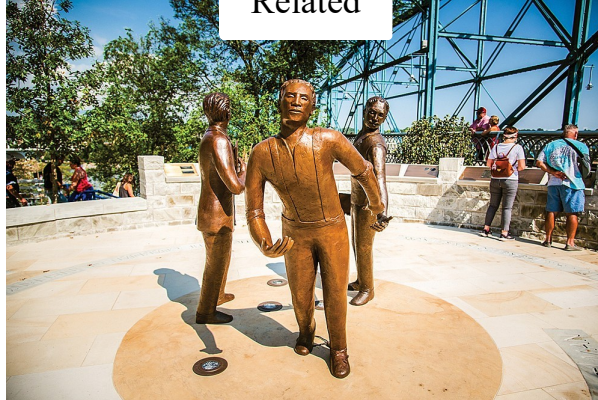


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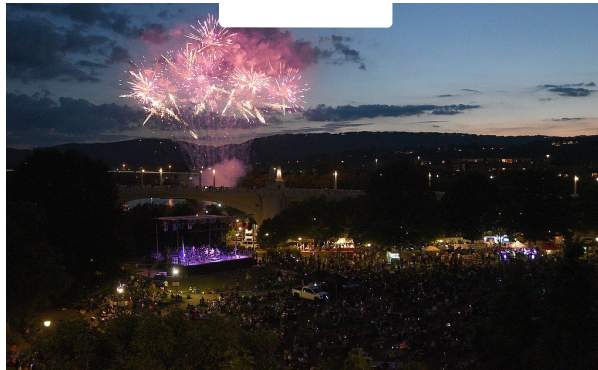
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Elected officials endorsed McDonald Farm, Enterprise South deal to the feds

October 16, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



 2 Comments

 Gift Article



Ten federal, state and local officials wrote letters of support for a proposed Hamilton County land swap deal before it was made public, and at least one

of them did not know about the most controversial aspect of the proposal.

County Mayor Weston Wamp's plan would slate about 500 acres of Enterprise South Nature Park near Ooltewah for industrial development and, in turn, conserve about 1,300 acres of McDonald Farm in Sale Creek.

At least one of the local officials who wrote letters in support of the plan did not know it involved development of the nature park — state Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison, said he intended to endorse a conceptual plan that prioritized conservation at McDonald Farm.

Wamp's proposal was developed in private for eight months, and he was going to make it public at an unspecified later date. Then he called a press conference on Oct 8 to announce the proposal after the Chattanooga Times Free Press informed him of plans for an article about the land swap.

In the week since, the deal has been the subject of debate on social media, with some from the Ooltewah area authoring a petition opposing the deal that has over 5,000 signatures as of Thursday afternoon.

Vital said there was no mention of specifics of the deal when he signed the letter of endorsement, cosigned by three of his fellow state elected officials. He was told by the county there would need to be some support for giving up land, which he assumed would involve a project like extending Hilltop Drive, but he was not aware that the deal would involve opening up parkland for industrial development.

The letter he signed made reference to Enterprise South, which includes an industrial park and a nature park. Development of the nature park was not

specifically mentioned.

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The letter with Vital's signature is dated Aug. 29. Other letters were sent in August and September, with one dated Oct. 7, the day before the announcement.

"I think there are a lot of unanswered questions that have now come to the surface," Vital said. "I support both the protection of Enterprise South Nature Park and McDonald Farm. There's no doubt about it, both of them are valuable conservation pieces of property. What I signed on to was a concept letter working to support the protection of McDonald Farm.

"Obviously, there has to be a lot more discussion," Vital said. "I still support trying to protect McDonald Farm, but we cannot compromise the integrity of Enterprise South Nature Park."

Records show the letters of endorsement were submitted to the U.S. Department of Interior, which plays a role in former military sites such as Enterprise South, which was an ammunition plant property. Federal approval is required for a change of use on the land.

Wamp mentioned the deal had earned the support of several officials during the Oct. 8 press conference.

"These letters of endorsement were written and signed before anything was announced to the public," Elspeth Haire, one of the organizers behind

opposition to the deal, said in a text message.

Those who wrote letters to the federal government include Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee, U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., and U.S. Rep. Chuck Fleischmann, R-Ooltewah. None except for Vital and state Rep. Esther Haynes, R-East Ridge, responded to a request for comment. Haynes said the letter she signed was solely sent to signal her support of Hamilton County's local government.

"I am supportive of the concept," Haynes wrote in a text message.

"Ultimately the final decision of acreage, etc., will be theirs to make."



Others who wrote in support:

- Stuart McWhorter, deputy governor and Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development commissioner
- Charlie Hatcher, former commissioner of agriculture and a current Republican primary challenger for U.S. Rep. Andy Ogles, R-Maury County
- State Sen. Bo Watson, R-North Chattanooga
- State Rep. Yusuf Hakeem, D-Chattanooga
- Charles Wood, president and CEO of the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce

(READ MORE: Some commissioners seeking clarity about McDonald Farm, Enterprise South land swap)

Each letter expressed resounding support for the deal, citing opportunities for economic growth in Chattanooga and praising the conservation of McDonald Farm, as well as outlining hopes for more tourism in the Sale Creek area. Some of the letters referenced "advanced manufacturing" as an option for what would spring from a land swap at Enterprise South, though no letters mentioned the nature park specifically.

"This thoughtful land use solution balances economic growth with long-term conservation and reflects the kind of local leadership and collaboration that Tennesseans value," wrote Blackburn, who is running for Tennessee governor. "I respectfully encourage your consideration and support of this initiative."

Watson, Haynes, Vital and Hakeem co-signed a joint letter. Put together,

they represent the majority of Hamilton County. Rep. Michele Reneau, R-Signal Mountain, would be the final of the four representatives whose districts include parts of the county. It is unclear whether she submitted a separate letter. She did not respond to a request for comment.

In the state elected officials' joint letter, they touted McDonald Farm's potential to become a "living classroom" to teach sustainable agriculture.

"Agritourism initiatives — such as seasonal festivals, farm-to-table experiences and hands-on workshops — would showcase the region's agricultural heritage and attract visitors from across the region," the elected officials' letter said.

The four officials also wanted to emphasize the goal of Enterprise South — economic growth.

"Its continued expansion has generated meaningful economic growth and opportunity, helping to elevate the quality of life for area residents," the letter said. "A land swap would amplify these benefits by enabling further investment and innovation within Enterprise South, solidifying its role as a cornerstone for employment and prosperity in our region."

The letter mentions the transfer of deed restrictions from portions of Enterprise South to McDonald Farm but does not mention the nature park specifically.

"This arrangement ensures that the spirit of conservation and responsible stewardship is preserved, while enabling Enterprise South to pursue industrial development and job creation with greater flexibility," the letter

said.

The land swap would spark the creation of more jobs in the area, the letter said.

The 2,800-acre nature park is adjacent to the 1,200-acre Enterprise South Industrial Park, which houses Volkswagen's manufacturing plant, an Amazon facility and a number of other companies' industrial buildings.

Lee's letter echoed the same, calling the tourism opportunities at McDonald Farm through the proposed land swap deal "realistic economic development."

(READ MORE: Survey: Residents want McDonald Farm saved for recreation)

McDonald Farm was long owned by the family of the late Roy McDonald, longtime publisher of the Chattanooga Free Press. The farm was purchased in 2021 for \$16 million under former County Mayor Jim Coppinger. At the time, county officials said the goal was to turn a large portion of the property, considered undevelopable, into a park, while earmarking the rest for industry.

The same was done when the county redeveloped a former U.S. Army ammunition plant into Enterprise South Industrial Park in 2008 — resulting in the nature park.

Wood's letter painted a dire picture for Chattanooga's industrial corridor if the land swap deal is not approved, describing it as a "last chance" for

Chattanooga to secure industry within city limits.

"With existing acreage now fully absorbed, Chattanooga faces a pivotal moment: Unless we unlock additional land, we will no longer have the large, contiguous sites required to recruit the next Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) or transformational employer," Wood's letter said.

Wood wrote that the deal would fit into the Trump administration's aims of creating jobs through manufacturing plants. He wrote it would contribute to making Chattanooga a hub of "advanced manufacturing" — also mentioned in the letters from Lee, Blackburn, McWhorter and Fleischmann.

According to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, advanced manufacturing involves "production activities that depend on information, automation, computation, software, sensing, and networking."

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

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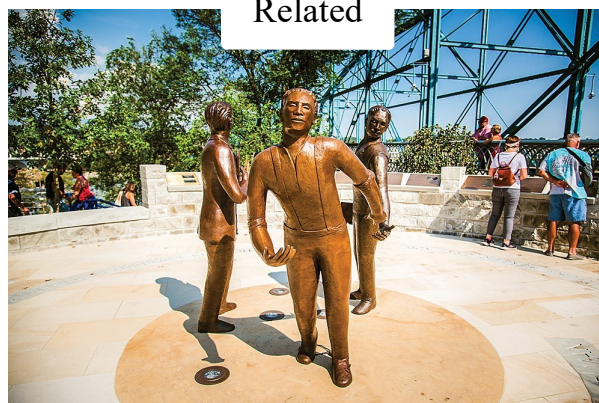
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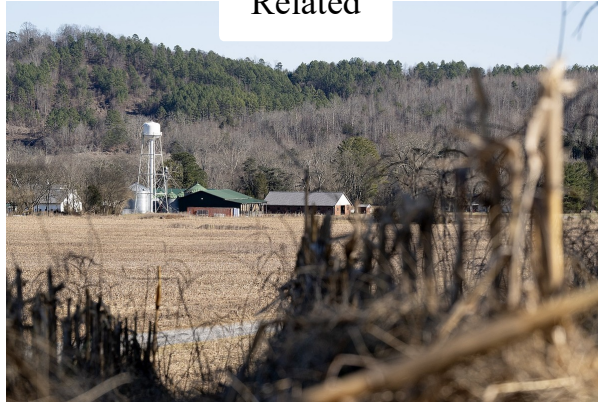
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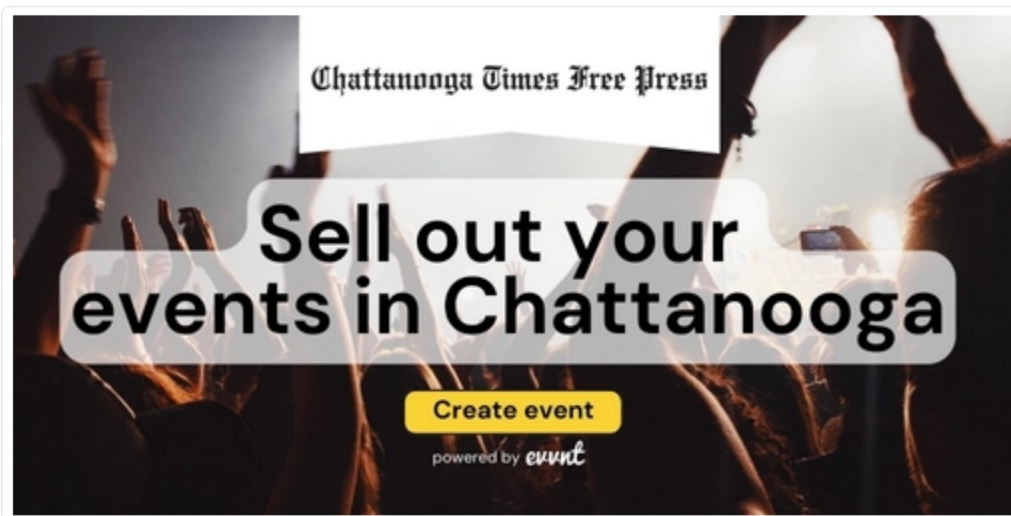
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Hamilton County commissioner didn't know about potential land swap before announcement

October 23, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#) | Updated October 24, 2025 at 1:53

p.m.



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One of the Hamilton County commissioners who represents neighbors of the Enterprise South Nature Park didn't know 500 acres of it would be slated for industrial development until the plans were publicly announced earlier this month.

Commissioner Steve Highlander, R-Harrison, said he had no knowledge of any plans to lift zoning restrictions on the land, a swath of wooded hills and ridges in the Ooltewah area, until Oct. 8, when County Mayor Weston Wamp held a press conference.

Wamp held the media briefing after the Chattanooga Times Free Press published an article revealing the plans.

"I have just so many unanswered questions," Highlander said in an interview. "I have not been included in any of this. I found out about it when the rest of the public did."

During the press conference, Wamp said the idea had been in the works for about eight months, and he did not intend to make the plans public until an unspecified later date.

Wamp's stated goal is to preserve 1,300 acres of the historic McDonald Farm in Sale Creek, originally bought by the county with the intent to develop for industry, while opening up federally protected land at Enterprise South for development.

The land was once a military ammunition site, and local officials agreed to keep it as parkland in perpetuity when taking possession. Federal approval is required for the county to break that promise.

Wamp's announcement of his plan for development of the park stirred residents in the surrounding area — some of whom are Highlander's constituents — with a petition opposing the plan gaining 8,000 signatures from across the county and beyond.

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor)

Several local, state and federal officials wrote letters of endorsement to the U.S. Department of Interior during the months of August and September, but Hamilton County commissioners were not among them. Earlier this week, state Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison, posted on social media that he did not know the acreage of the proposal, nor that it would involve the nature park when he cosigned his letter of endorsement.

Highlander read about it early in the morning on his way to a conference the week of the announcement, he said. He understands that some things need to be worked on behind the scenes, he said, but he wants to be involved with more collaboration from the Mayor's Office moving forward.

Mayoral spokesperson Haley Burton said in a text message that Wamp and his staff informed commissioners about the plans prior to the public announcement, referencing a visit by Commissioner Jeff Eversole, R-Ooltewah, and Wamp to Nashville to discuss the proposal with Gov. Bill Lee.

"From the outset, the Hamilton County Commission has been informed and appropriately involved in preliminary discussions about this proposal,"

Burton wrote. "As is standard practice, our team engaged with commission leadership — including then-Chair Jeff Eversole, the Economic Development Committee chair, the Finance Committee chair and commissioners representing the districts directly affected by the project."

The chair of the Finance Committee at the time was Commissioner Ken Smith, R-Hixson, before he most recently became chair of the commission as a whole. Smith said he was made aware of discussions about the plan this past summer.

"I remember seeing the maps, but it was made very clear that everything was preliminary and would need to go through a long process," he said.

The chair of the Economic Development Committee was Commissioner Lee Helton, R-East Brainerd. Helton said he was made aware of the plan over the summer but was unaware of the acreage.

Highlander said he's all for bringing jobs to the area to make wages competitive, but he still knows too little to oppose or support the plan as of now. He wants to know what kind of industry would be built and whether factors like noise and pollutants would be of concern for the neighborhoods around the 500-acre parcel.

(READ MORE: Wamp says no trails, cemeteries to be affected at Enterprise South)

Generally, he does not want any industry backing up to the homes of people in those neighborhoods, he said.

He also has his doubts about the viability of the parcel for industrial use in general, he said. It is steep, dotted with sharp drops and climbs.

"I have walked over that area quite a bit," Highlander said. "The topography of a lot of it would take massive, massive land movement to make it level."

Bikers who frequent the park have voiced concerns about the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail being affected by Wamp's proposal, since it's inside the 500-acre parcel identified by the county. The Mayor's Office has said that if the trail will be affected by development, the county will work to move it into another area of the park.

The southern border of the parcel is near a neglected historic cemetery known to residents of surrounding neighborhoods. The county has said the cemetery will be unaffected by future plans for industrial development. The Times Free Press has requested a digital map of the parcel that was shown on an easel at Wamp's press conference, to check the exact location, but it has not yet been provided.

Highlander said the county should be focusing more of its attention on an 800-acre piece of land that Volkswagen has an option on — meaning the county has agreed to sell it exclusively to Volkswagen if the company pays within a certain time frame. The option expires next year. If Volkswagen relinquishes it, the county should zero in on courting companies to develop there as its first priority, he said. He thinks Wamp has the county's best interests in mind, he said, but he needs more answers.

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at

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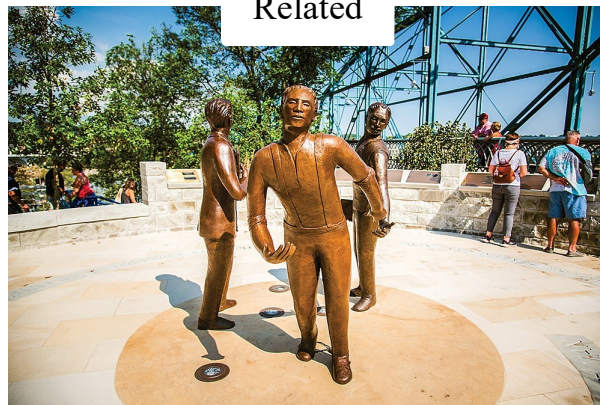
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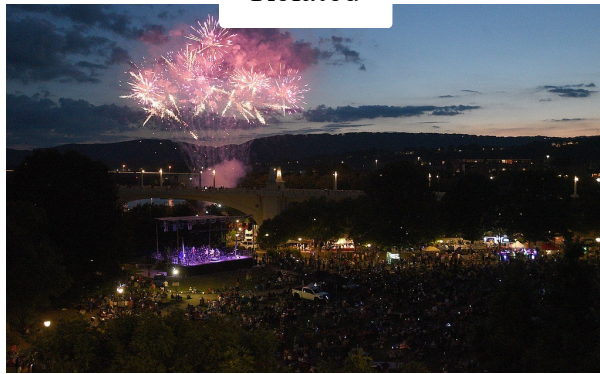
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Residents weigh in on McDonald Farm-Enterprise South deal's potential impact

October 26, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



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The land behind Renee Eldridge's Ooltewah home was brown when she first moved into the third and last house on her street decades ago.

Her backyard was on an overgrown hillside where, not far off, bunkers for a defunct U.S. ammunition plant were covered in vines and dead leaves. She thought it would never become much of anything, she said. It was what they called "brown land" back then, too inundated with contaminants to funnel money into fixing up for development.

Then, after a major overhaul from both the Hamilton County and federal governments to clean up thousands of acres in the area in the 2000s, Eldridge was pleasantly surprised to find the land steps from her backyard federally protected for recreation and conservation, she said. It became Enterprise South Nature Park, which now welcomes hundreds of visitors each day.

"We thought with it being protected, it was protected for life," Eldridge said. "We never expected them to continue to want to build into the actual park, and never expected them to build up against our property."

The park is now embroiled in a debate over a proposed plan unveiled by County Mayor Weston Wamp earlier this month to lift protections on a 500-acre portion -- the border of which backs up against Eldridge's neighborhood. It would be slated for industrial use, Wamp has said, in exchange for conserving 1,300 acres about 30 miles to the north, at the historic McDonald Farm in Sale Creek. If all goes to plan, federal restrictions would apply to McDonald Farm as well as the remainder of the nature park.

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor).

Those in the northern end of the county celebrated the announcement after years of protesting any development on the county-owned farm, once owned by the family of the late former publisher of the Chattanooga Free Press, Roy McDonald. But for communities in the southeastern end, where growth has skyrocketed, the news came as a punch in the gut, they said.

CHATTANOOGA TIMES FREE PRESS READER P

Question 1 of 1

Which land should be preserved?

- ☐ McDonald Farm
- ☐ Enterprise South Nature Park
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Both



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GROWING AREA

Collegedale, the city surrounding the Ooltewah enclave and the most southeastern municipality in the county, grew rapidly in the 2010s after

Volkswagen established its plant at Enterprise South Industrial Park, adjacent to the nature park. According to census data, Collegedale's population grew 24% from 2010 to 2020 -- faster than any other municipality in Hamilton County, faster even than Nashville during that time period.

People who live there view the nature park as one of the last major green spaces amid a sea of development in their area, Eldridge said.

But the 500-acre parcel has also been described as a "last chance" for large-scale industry to come within Chattanooga's city limits, according to Charles Wood, president and CEO of the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce, who wrote a letter of endorsement for the swap. With the revamp work done to establish Enterprise South Industrial Park -- where Amazon and other companies have set up shop -- came infrastructure like rail, sewer and through-roads. The area is one of the most viable to bring economic development to the city, Wood wrote.

Wamp's office has repeatedly said it would take millions of dollars to put in that same infrastructure at McDonald Farm. In 2021, the agricultural property was purchased by the county for \$16 million under the administration of then-County Mayor Jim Copping, with the hopes that it could eventually be developed for industry.

After economic surveys showing high costs and a public outcry decried development, the Hamilton County Commission and the Mayor's Office -- now populated by Wamp's team -- turned its sights on agritourism and conservation for the property.

In the meantime, growth in the southeastern part of the county has evened out in recent years, but the area is strained by its impact, said Eldridge, who remembers when her neighborhood was just a few houses, a diner, a grocery store and a dry cleaner. Traffic has increased her commute time. Miller Industries moved into the other side of the neighborhood, where photos show backyard views of semitrucks and clear-cut land yards away.

Eldridge, who has a lung disease, is worried about how an increase in pollutants will affect her daily life with more industry a couple hundred feet from her door. She and her husband had intended to live out their retirement in their house.

"We're glad they preserved that (McDonald Farm) for them, but we don't want them to come over here and do it to us," Eldridge said. "Some people have made remarks -- 'Y'all should have known that when you bought there.' Well, that was 33 years ago. I don't know how we would have ever known that."

(READ MORE: Collegedale grows the fastest among area cities, new census shows)

Reasons voiced for opposition to the plan range from disturbing wildlife like deer and endangered orchids to building over trails to protecting a neglected historic cemetery at the edge of the parcel.

An organized effort called Save Enterprise South Nature Park is led by Melissa Ray, Elspeth Haire, Nathan Griffin and Hadrien Turner. A petition opposing the plan has gained over 8,000 signatures since Ray started it

earlier this month.

They didn't expect the movement to take off so much, Turner said.

"I think that really indicates that this is not a plan that is popular with people, citizens, taxpayers," Turner said. "They don't want to see their public parks be taken away for industry."

Photo Gallery

Residents weigh in on McDonald Farm-Enterprise South deal's potential impact

1 / 20



KEY GREEN SPACE

Griffin, who is an accounts manager for the Red Cross, put together an analysis using census surveys and geospatial intelligence data of the accessibility of the nature park versus McDonald Farm for the whole of the county.

His analysis says about 182,000 residents of Hamilton County are within a 20-minute drive of the nature park, while about 5,000 are within a 20-minute drive of McDonald Farm. The accessibility of the park is what makes it such a key piece of green space, Griffin said.

"Let's be clear," Griffin said. "We own both of these properties. This shouldn't be a choice between one or another. Both Enterprise South and McDonald Farm deserve protection."

The 500 acres identified for industrial use by Wamp at an Oct. 8 press conference make up about 17% of Enterprise South Nature Park, encompassing the Atlas Mountain Bike Trail beyond the fence line of the rest of the park. The county has said the acreage that is actually zoned for industry could change, if the plan goes through, after inspectors determine which parts of the land would be suitable for it. If the trail would be affected, the county would work to move it into the remainder of the park, mayoral spokesperson Haley Burton said initially -- though she said Friday evening

that as plans have evolved, the trail will not be affected.

That comes as little comfort for Robert Gohr, who moved to the Ooltewah area 20 years ago for its parks, he said. An avid mountain biker, he rides the Atlas trail regularly, and Wamp's messaging calling the targeted area of the park "underutilized" upsets him, Gohr said. He knows many bikers who love the trail due to its remote location. It's one of the only places where he sees deer in the park, he said.

Moving the trail would mean it wasn't the Atlas trail anymore, he said, and the process would probably take time and money he doesn't believe the county would commit to.

"They're misrepresenting the park," Gohr said. "They're misrepresenting the trail system. It's way bigger than they're letting on, and they're cutting right through the center of that sucker and killing the biggest nature trail there."

(READ MORE: Hamilton County commissioner didn't know about potential land swap before announcement)

Gohr also feels like he's being jilted by the proposal, since it nets more conserved land for the county but much farther from his home, he said. He's never been to McDonald Farm, and he doesn't plan to go, he said. He moved to the Chattanooga area to escape the farmlands he grew up around in Michigan -- he has no interest in walking trails created in that area, he said, when there are other places in the northern part of the county that have mountains and waterfalls.

VOICES HEARD

Jennifer Duvall, a Sale Creek resident and staunch advocate for the protection of McDonald Farm, resents the idea of land preservation being presented as a choice between the farm and the nature park, she said.

(READ MORE: Survey: Residents want McDonald Farm saved for recreation)

Duvall is pleased the farm, a stretch of thousands of acres between the rolling hills of Sale Creek, would be preserved and possibly federally protected under the plan. But she supports her southeast neighbors and their opposition to industrial development of the park, she said. She's worked with them before to get everyone's voices heard when Plan Hamilton, guidelines for development in the county's unincorporated areas, was recently up for a commission vote.

"Unfortunately, Ooltewah has taken the brunt of growth and development over the past 50 years, and they want to see that slow down," Duvall said. "And rightly so. I think seeing how much land loss has happened nationally and even in everyone's backyards is striking."

At the end of the day, though, the deal will likely go through the same public input process the plans for McDonald Farm did, said Mason Eslinger, a descendant of the McDonald family. He thinks it's unlikely that the 500 park acres will see development. He grew up walking the nature park's trails, and he's aware of the topography of the land -- its sharp inclines probably won't lend themselves to industrial development for companies

unwilling to pour money into leveling them, he said.

He said he predicts that history will repeat itself: McDonald Farm was assessed for potential industry, and only a few small sections of it turned out to be viable.

Opposition to the proposed exchange of land uses does bother him, he said. It's the biggest step forward he's seen when it comes to preserving his ancestors' farm, and he doesn't want that stymied, he said.

"I feel like we need to take a step back as outdoorsmen, conservationists, preservationists, bikers, hikers and don't put the cart before the horse," Eslinger said. "By opposing this trade-off, you are looking at something that could detrimentally impact McDonald Farm to where it may never be preserved or it may never be conserved."

Plans to lift restrictions on the nature park are in their preliminary stages, according to the county, and would require federal approval and a vote from the Hamilton County Commission and the Chattanooga City Council.

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

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Proposed Enterprise South Nature Park development tests meaning of 'forever'

November 23, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



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"Forever." "In perpetuity."

The language in the deed by which a former military site became Enterprise South Nature Park preserves all 2,750 acres for recreational use, for keeps.

But a plan proposed by Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp would carve out 500 acres of the southern end -- a little over a sixth of the Ooltewah park -- for industry instead. It's been called a deed restriction swap by Wamp and other county officials because, alongside the rezoning for industry, the county is offering the preservation of 1,300 acres of the historic McDonald Farm in Sale Creek.

The announcement in early October -- first reported by the Chattanooga Times Free Press -- came as a shock to Nathan Griffin, who visited the nature park back when he was living in Kansas City with his wife, Elspeth Haire, while he was looking for houses in Chattanooga.

He saw the language of the nature park's deed displayed at the park's visitor center: "federally protected land." Park staff told him if he bought a home backing up to the park, it would stay green, natural and heavily wooded forever, he said.

"Buy the house, they'll never build behind you," Griffin said in an interview, referring to what he heard from park staff.

The proposal has rapidly gained opposition from those who live around the nature park, like Griffin and Haire, who started a petition that has surpassed 10,000 signatures.

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor)

Residents have cited concerns more broadly about development in their backyards, but also about the area slated for industry including a mountain bike trail and possibly an abandoned cemetery. Haley Burton, spokesperson for Wamp, said that as plans evolve, the trail and the cemetery will not be affected -- but the proposal's critics remain skeptical.

At its heart, their issue lies with repurposing a deed-restricted public park for industry, said Melissa Ray, one of the cofounders of the petition alongside her partner, Hadrien Turner. Ray is raising her and Turner's children in her childhood home, close to the nature park.

Together with Griffin and Haire, the four founded the nonprofit Save Enterprise South Nature Park as a result of the proposal. They've felt blindsided by the idea the park's protections could change, Ray said.

"Hearing the news that first day, it felt like suddenly I didn't understand how the world worked," Ray said. "You assume this is going to remain here as a park forever. There's just an expectation that parks are parks, and they're not for sale to private interest."

But what does that nature park deed say? And what does the county have to do to change it?

particularly described in Enclosure A, attached hereto and made a part hereof.

SUBJECT TO any and all existing rights-of-way for public roads, highways, utilities, pipelines and easements and covenants

affecting the above-described premises, whether or not the same now appear of record, including but not limited to an easement with Tennessee Valley Authority for two (2) transmission lines, an easement with Colonial Pipeline Company for a pipeline, and a water line easement with Eastside Utility District.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD the hereinbefore described Property, subject to the reservations, exceptions, restrictions, conditions and covenants herein expressed and set forth unto the Grantee, its successors and assigns, **forever**.

On September 24, 2003 the United States Department of the Army determined the Property to be excess to its needs and therefore pursuant to authority contained in the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended, and applicable rules, regulations and orders promulgated thereunder, the General Services Administration assigned the Property to the Department of the Interior for further conveyance to the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee and Hamilton County, Tennessee.

Instrument# 20050329000242

IN PERPETUITY

As of now, all of the nature park must be dedicated to recreational land use on an ongoing basis, according to the 51-page deed obtained by the Times Free Press in full.

"These restrictions and covenants are binding on the Grantee, its successors and assigns; shall run with the land; and are forever enforceable," the deed says, one of three times it uses the word "forever."

The term "in perpetuity" is also used, in three separate instances.

Colloquially understood as parkland, recreational use can span a variety of activities, but it typically prohibits residential, commercial or industrial use.

The deed says that the county and the city can't sell off the land to a private

company. It would have to be another public entity, like the state or another city, and the land use would still have to be the same. In fact, all of the restrictions in the deed must "run with the land," a legal term meaning they'll automatically pass on to whoever owns the property next.

"The property shall not be sold, leased, assigned, or otherwise disposed of," the deed says, "except to another eligible governmental agency that the Secretary of the Interior agrees in writing can assure the continued use and maintenance of the property for public park or public recreational purposes."

Much of the language of the deed would seem to prohibit Wamp's plan to designate 500 acres for industry, but his office points to a sentence in the deed which references a process for an amendment.

"The Property shall be used and maintained for the public purposes for which it was conveyed in perpetuity as set forth in the Program of Utilization and plan contained in the application, submitted by the Grantee on October 20, 1999," the deed says, "which program and plan may be amended from time to time at the request of either the Grantor or Grantee, with the written concurrence of the other party, and such amendments shall be added to and become a part of the original application."

Although the amendment language refers to changing a "program and plan" from the 1999 application for a transfer of federal land, Burton said in an email that the county is seeking a deed amendment.

([READ MORE: Opponents of Hamilton County land swap proposal](#))

question potential road through Enterprise South Nature Park)

When asked, an unnamed spokesperson for the National Park Service wrote in an email that any land acquired through its Land to Parks program -- part of Enterprise South Nature Park's transformation from unused U.S. ammunition plant to nature park -- must be used solely for parks and recreation purposes.

"However, under certain circumstances, this commitment may be transferred to another property," the spokesperson wrote. "The land exchange process offers a path forward for addressing necessary changes while still upholding the public recreation purpose of the original conveyance."

The exchange process was referenced in the land swap's initial announcement, linking it to McDonald Farm. The farm, well known by the community of Sale Creek, was owned by the family of the late former owner of the Chattanooga Free Press, Roy McDonald. The county bought the farm in 2021 for \$16 million, with talk of a possible industrial site alongside parkland. Since then, county officials have said the cost to bring industry to the area, which lacks sewer access, would be prohibitively high. Proponents of the exchange plan have pointed out the nature park is adjacent to a major industrial park, including Volkswagen and Amazon plants, that has the proper infrastructure.

When asked what the requirements would be for a land exchange, the National Park Service did not respond. The spokesperson did confirm city and county officials were in talks with the U.S. Department of Interior about

a possible exchange, but did not specify how far along the process was.

STATE REQUIREMENTS

Before the county can apply for a deed amendment, the Hamilton County Commission needs to approve the action. Then the Chattanooga City Council has to do the same. Then, to get federal approval, the county will have to work with the federal government to solicit public opinion and appraise the land, plus conduct an environmental assessment.

If it gets approval, then it goes back to the commission and the council, who must approve the proposal again. The final step is getting the rubber stamp from the state.

But there may be even more legal hoops to jump through for the Wamp administration to see the proposal through.

Over the years, the nature park has received about \$750,000 in state grants for the development of the park's trails, roads, parking and visitor center, according to emails obtained by the Times Free Press.

Each grant comes with strings attached, according to state guidelines.

Park land that receives grant money must be kept for public outdoor recreation, or go through a state application process to convert it into something else, according to the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation.

"This request process is designed to prevent the arbitrary disposal or change of federally assisted project sites that should be maintained for

public outdoor recreation project funding," the department's Standard Operating Procedures manual reads. "And so that everyone involved -- local, state and federal governments -- will be held accountable for their actions."

A request will cost the county a \$10,000 fee, according to the manual.

(READ MORE: Wamp says county will take public input for Enterprise South, McDonald Farm swap into 2026)

And in order for that conversion request to get approval, the county will have to identify land that is "reasonably equivalent in usefulness" and is equal to or greater than the market value of the 500-acre parcel in the nature park to convert to public use instead. It's unclear whether McDonald Farm will meet those requirements, or whether the county would plan on proposing McDonald Farm, rather than some other parcel of land, for that aspect of conversion at all.

Burton wrote in a text message that the county is aware of the state's rules about grants, but in the county's view, amending the deed doesn't necessarily change the land use for recreation in the meantime. She did not specify whether the county plans to submit a conversion application in the future if Wamp wants to move forward with plans to put industry there.

The manual also says the county has to survey the public. If 51% of responses to that survey are opposed to a conversion, the request won't get approval.

Wamp and other county officials have emphasized in the past the plans are

in their preliminary phases. During an Oct. 8 press conference he called after the Times Free Press released a story about the plans, he said the proposal had been in the works for eight months and he intended to make it public at an unspecified later date. Letters of endorsement were sent by nearly a dozen local, state and federal officials to the U.S. Department of Interior in August, September and October, before the plans went public.

"It is standard to seek state support and make sure those involved support a concept before the process begins," Burton wrote in an email. "We viewed their early involvement as essential because many of those who signed letters of support are parties to the deed restrictions and would ultimately have to approve any final plan."

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

Siena Duncan

sduncan@timesfreepress.com



Siena Duncan reports on the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County for the Times Free Press. She has a degree in journalism from the University of Florida, where she earned Hearst, Mark of Excellence and Sunshine State awards. When she's not writing, she's attempting to pet her ornery cat Soup or getting lost in the mountains.

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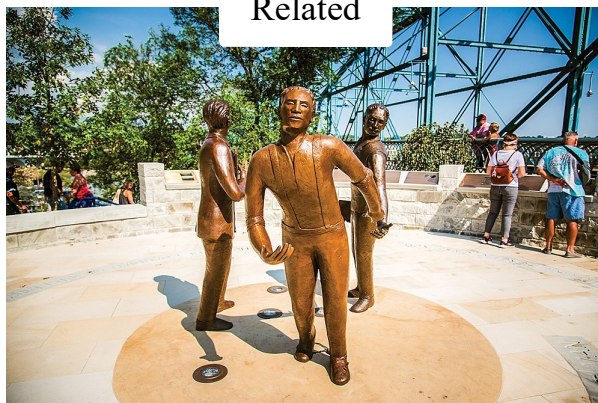
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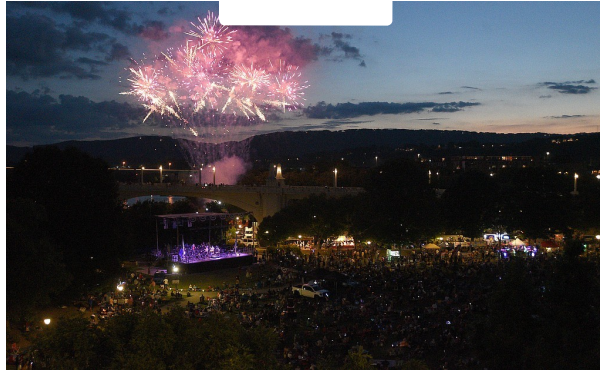
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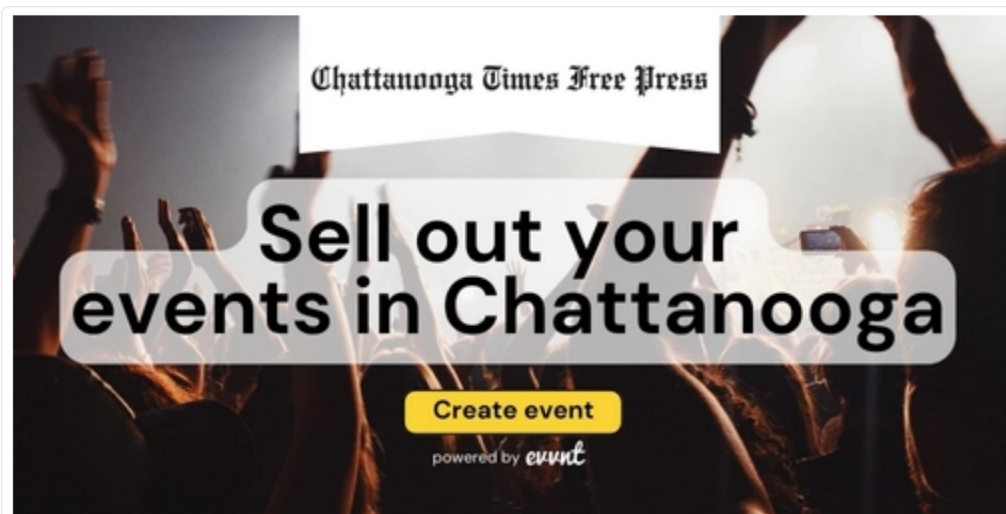


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Local historians concerned about Hamilton County plans for historic Black cemetery

December 13, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



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Local historians are racing to unearth more knowledge about a neglected cemetery near Ooltewah, as Hamilton County officials plan to build a road extension that may affect the area.

Nestled in a heavily wooded area off Interstate 75, Summit Cemetery has been called a local legend by people living in the neighborhoods surrounding it. Marked by a rundown white gate and dotted by a handful of legible headstones, historians say it's possible the area is home to over 200 unmarked graves — which may be the remnants of a Black community founded just after the Civil War.

The graveyard is on the border of Enterprise South Nature Park, which has been a subject of community concern and debate since County Mayor Weston Wamp announced plans in October to open 500 acres of the park up for industrial development despite an agreement with the federal government for it to be parkland in perpetuity.

Plans approved in August by the Hamilton County Commission for an extension of Hilltop Drive show the road winding through that southern end of the park and possibly cutting through unmarked graves in Summit Cemetery, according to residents familiar with the area. The road is meant to relieve traffic congestion in the area, according to the plans.

Hamilton County officials have said their proposal for the area will not affect the cemetery, but residents remain skeptical. Both the industrial development proposal and the road plans have set in motion a movement of Ooltewah locals, environmentalists and historians to document and protect the cemetery.

"I do feel there's definitely a time crunch because of this pending development," said Jared Story, an Ooltewah resident who's now collecting records of the cemetery.

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor)

Decades ago, Story's mother-in-law used to tell him about the cemetery, believing her great-great-grandmother had been buried there, he said. She told him she wanted the area cleared of brush piles and thorny vines, cleaned up in a way that was respectful to her ancestors. She has since died, and Story is determined to find a way to carry out her vision, he said.

When he heard of the proposals for industrial development in the area, he got to work, he said.

Story, who has a history degree from East Tennessee State University, dug through old newspaper clippings and death records. He got in touch with longtime residents of the Summit community, south of the nature park, who might have memories of the cemetery — and found possible descendants of those buried there.

He also contacted Carroll Van West, the Tennessee state historian and director of Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation.

Research shows the cemetery likely was attached to a large Black community in the area, Van West said, founded around the 1890s with the Summit community's earliest churches. Thousands of acres there were

seized by the federal government in the 1940s to build a munitions plant for World War II, displacing several Black communities and cutting Summit Cemetery off from families of those buried there.

Story said he found documentation of at least one husband and wife who had to be buried apart from one another because of the munitions plant's construction.

The munitions plant became Enterprise South Nature Park and the adjacent industrial park by the early 2000s, once the plant became defunct and local and federal officials invested millions into revamping the area. The nature park was dedicated in perpetuity as parkland, but Wamp wants to open hundreds of acres of it for development, proposing instead to preserve a farm in Sale Creek.

(READ MORE: Residents weigh in on McDonald Farm-Enterprise South deal's potential impact)

The cemetery on the edge of the nature park hasn't necessarily been forgotten, Story said — it just hasn't been readily accessible for over 80 years.

Now he's worried about what construction of a road could do to the cemetery. He's found records that suggest at least 50 people are buried there, finding more names each day. Federal documentation from the 1930s says there are over 200 unmarked graves in the area.





That's why it's hard to believe county assurances the cemetery won't be impacted, he said. If there's no documentation of where the boundary lines are, how does the county know construction won't touch grave sites?

Van West said it's not uncommon for historic sites to earn protections this way. In Tennessee, he can recall working on several projects involving historic buildings and cemeteries threatened by future development, spurring action from residents to ensure they weren't affected. He's optimistic that Chattanooga and Hamilton County officials will be amenable to protecting Summit Cemetery, he said.

But the process to get a historic designation for a cemetery can take a year or more, he said.

"This is always something that you are concerned with, that something can happen before the research is completed," Van West said.

(READ MORE: Opponents of Hamilton County land swap proposal question potential road through Enterprise South Nature Park)

Tennessee law says that interested parties, like a local government or developers who own the land, can petition Chancery Court to remove human remains and rebury them somewhere else if a grave site is abandoned or neglected. It's a felony to disturb human remains otherwise. Seven petitions to relocate cemeteries were filed in Tennessee in 2024 and eight in 2023.

Hamilton County officials have not indicated any plans to move Summit Cemetery graves. Still, it's a concern of Eric Atkins, cochair of the Unity Group of Chattanooga.

"It's a terrible idea," Atkins said. "We can't get to the point where we dishonor the final resting place of people. It's wrong."

The Unity Group, a civil rights organization, put out a statement in mid-November against lifting deed restrictions in the nature park and against developing a road near the cemetery.

Atkins, like Story, is skeptical the county knows for certain those plans won't affect the grave sites, he said. He'd like to see the county perform a radar scan of the area to find all the unmarked graves, he said.

"You don't want bulldozers in the ground until you have properly mapped out and catalogued the area the cemetery encompasses," Atkins said, "and have some discussion with the remaining family members and descendants."

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.





Siena Duncan

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Siena Duncan reports on the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County for the Times Free Press. She has a degree in journalism from the University of Florida, where she earned Hearst, Mark of Excellence and Sunshine State awards. When she's not writing, she's attempting to pet her ornery cat Soup or getting lost in the mountains.

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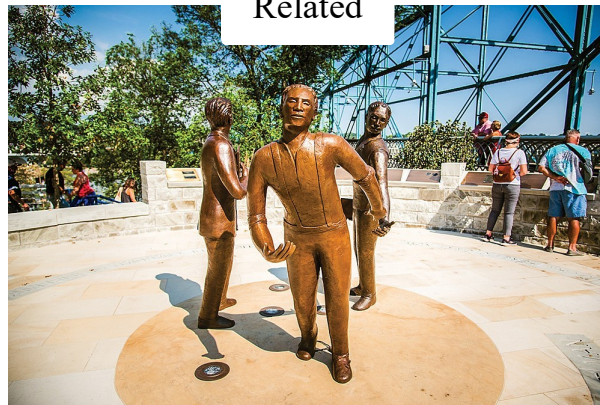
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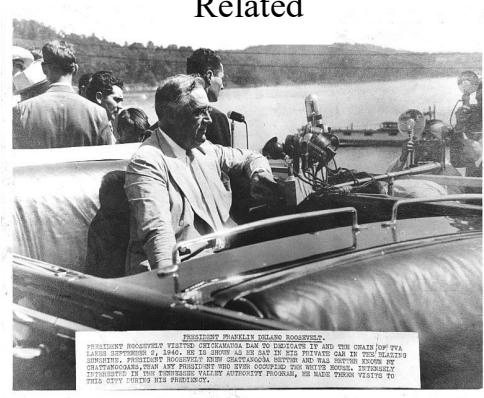
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Residents walk Enterprise South hills where Wamp plans industrial development

December 23, 2025 by [Siena Duncan](#)



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chattanooga times free press



Watch on

Bundled in flannels and coats, dozens gathered on a crisp December afternoon for a group hike down the southern slopes of Enterprise South

Nature Park — an area that would be slated for industrial use, should Hamilton County officials' plans come to fruition.

Organized by the nonprofit Save Enterprise South Nature Park, about 60 to 70 people found their way to the entrance of the Atlas Trail on Saturday. The group was varied, with conservationists, Ooltewah neighbors, historians and several local politicians walking side-by-side down the dirt trail, all chatting about the county's proposal to carve the parkland out for industrial development.

For some, it was one of hundreds of times they'd been to the park. For others, it was their first. Several brought their dogs to get in their walk of the day.

The proposal, spearheaded by County Mayor Weston Wamp, would take a 500-acre parcel of the park once promised as recreational space in perpetuity and instead earmark it for industry. To gain federal approval of the land use change for the former military munitions site, Wamp is proposing to preserve 1,300 acres of a farm site in Sale Creek.

Photo Gallery

Residents walk Enterprise South hills where Wamp plans industrial development

Plans were announced in early October after the Chattanooga Times Free Press reported on the potential swap. The idea has gotten significant pushback since then, with a petition in opposition breaching 12,000 signatures as of Saturday.

"If the county is able to basically appeal to the Department of Interior to lift deed restrictions on permanently protected land, then it means they could start doing that for pretty much anything," Hadrien Turner, one of the co-founders of the nonprofit, told the crowd on the hike. "We're doing everything we can to make it very clear that forever means forever."

State Rep. Greg Vital, R-Harrison, was in attendance, alongside Collegedale Commissioner Laura Howse, Hamilton County school board member Felice

Hadden, R-Ooltewah, and Hamilton County Commissioner David Sharpe, D-Red Bank.

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Vital put his staunch support behind the organizers of the event as part of some brief remarks to the crowd and asked them to continue reaching out to him, other state representatives and Hamilton County officials about the proposal.

He knows economic development and job creation is needed in the county, but he said the parkland is not the place to turn for it.

"There's plenty of land over there for economic development," he said, referring to the industrial park adjacent to the nature park, where the Volkswagen plant is located. "There are still other places within the county. Yes, it is limited, but quality of life is limited too. And we can't destroy that."

The majority of the area the hikers passed through was within the bounds of the county's mapped out area proposed for industry. The land was covered in a coat of soaring pine trees and muddied by past rain. The dirt path was wide and clear.

It was Sharpe's first time walking the Atlas Trail. What caught his attention while he walked was the topography of the land. He's not convinced it's an area well suited for future industry, he said.

"I wasn't aware of how rolling it is out here," he said. "There's a lot of land

out here that, if it were developed, it would take a lot of earth moving. It's certainly much more interesting topography here for recreation."

The hike took the group down the Atlas Trail, winding all the way to a neglected cemetery near Interstate 75 that has caught the eye of local historians worried hundreds of unmarked graves could be impacted by the proposed development.

Wamp spokesperson Haley Burton said no trails or cemeteries will be affected by the county's plans

"No cemeteries or graves within the nature park will be impacted or disturbed by this proposal, as confirmed repeatedly by our office and Parks and Recreation officials," Burton wrote in a text message. "We understand and respect the community's concerns; however, suggesting otherwise misrepresents the facts and unnecessarily alarms the public."

A couple members of the Summit community south of the nature park came to walk the trail and see the cemetery, where their ancestors may be buried. Jared Story, a local historian, said he's been working with members of the Tennessee Historical Commission to figure out how many are buried there, since there are only a handful of legible headstones left.

(READ MORE: Residents speak against Enterprise South, McDonald Farm plans as Wamp watches)

Story has found records that indicate the area was a Black community post-Civil War with schools and churches before the federal government seized the land and gave people 30 days to move out because it planned to build a

munitions plant for World War II. The plant became defunct after the Vietnam War, and the area was eventually cleaned up and revamped into the current industrial park and nature park.

Ada Sanders-Nance remembers her grandparents talking about a time when they lived in the area that has now become the nature park. Her father, now dead, and his six siblings lived there until the government forced them to move, she said.

Her great-aunt had seen something about the hike on TV, she said, and urged her to go and see the gravesites.

"I think they were happy here," Sanders-Nance said. "My dad and I would drive by the freeway and he would tell me, 'That's where I used to live.' Just being here where he used to walk around and play is nostalgic, in a way."

As the group passed a pond, she wondered aloud whether her father had gone swimming there as a child.

(READ MORE: Residents weigh in on McDonald Farm-Enterprise South deal's potential impact)

Similarly, Lamechee Jones was told stories about his grandmother owning hundreds of acres in the nature park's area. He's trying to help a few people in his community clean up the cemetery. The county's plans for the area do concern him, he said, when it comes to the gravesites.

But the proposal for industry in the area angers him as a whole, he said. The land was his family's and his community's, he said, and then it was turned

into a government plant. Now, it will become another money-making mechanism for people other than those it was originally owned by, he said.

He wants to find some way to get his and others' voices heard, he said.

"It makes you look back and see how generational wealth wasn't passed down," Jones said as he stood beside the cemetery. "I really want to get the community together and take all these teardrops of information and try to put them in a bucket. So somebody can speak solid on it."

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

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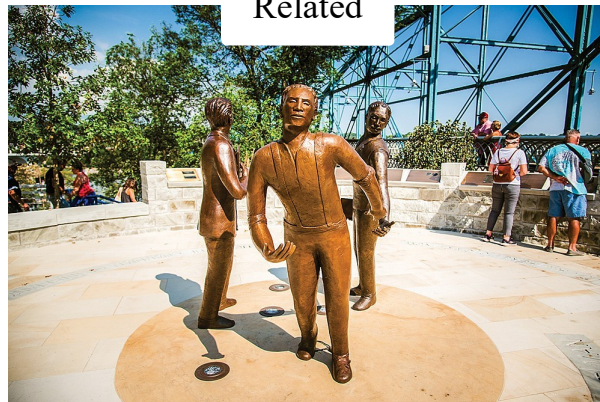
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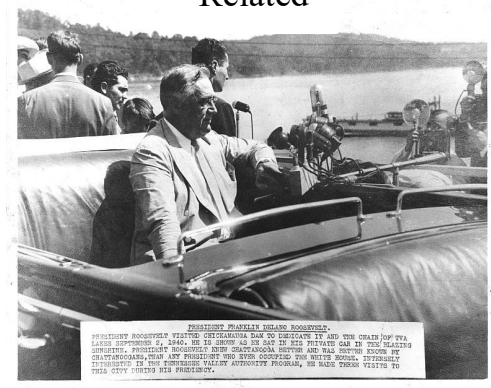
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Wamp cancels plans for Enterprise South Nature Park

January 6, 2026 by [Siena Duncan](#) | Updated January 6, 2026 at 8:52

p.m.



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Hamilton County Mayor Weston Wamp has dropped his proposal for industrial development on 500 acres of Enterprise South Nature Park, his

office announced Tuesday.

Wamp's original plan to open up 500 acres of the nature park to industrial development will no longer move forward after public input, according to a press release from Wamp's office.

The proposal was announced in October after the Chattanooga Times Free Press revealed the long-secret plan. It drew waves of opposition as a nonprofit formed specifically for the park's protection and a petition cleared 12,000 signatures. Residents' concerns ranged from the destruction of a mountain bike trail to disturbing human remains at an abandoned cemetery to industry in their backyards.

(SIGN UP: Get the weekly politics newsletter, "Open Door," in your email box by going to timesfreepress.com/opendoor)

Wamp and his spokesperson, Haley Burton, reiterated several times that no trails or cemeteries would be affected by the plans, but those opposed remained skeptical.

The proposal was posed as a "deed restriction swap" by Wamp, meaning a county promise to keep the nature park for recreational use forever would be broken, but the county would make new promises to preserve McDonald Farm in Sale Creek. The federal Interior Department would have had to approve the swap, as the nature park is former military land.

"Throughout the public input process, we heard from citizens who value the

nature park as well as the history and legacy of McDonald Farm," Wamp said in the release. "In the months ahead, we will work with city and state officials to identify sites better suited for future job creation, while advancing a broader vision for McDonald Farm in the best interest of taxpayers."

When asked to specify what options the county is looking at for McDonald Farm, Burton referred the Times Free Press back to the press release.

"In the months ahead, we will work with city and state officials to identify sites better suited for future job creation, while advancing a broader vision for McDonald Farm in the best interest of taxpayers," the press release said.

Hamilton County Commissioner Gene-o Shipley, R-Soddy-Daisy, who represents the part of the county including the farm, did not respond to a request for comment in time for publication.

In its own Monday press release, Save Enterprise South Nature Park, the nonprofit founded in opposition to the proposal, celebrated Wamp's decision as a win.

"This outcome reflects what happens when a community shows up," said Melissa Ray, one of the nonprofit's co-founders. "Neighbors, families, outdoor enthusiasts, historians and everyday park users spoke clearly and consistently about what this place means to them. Their voices matter."

Photo Gallery

Wamp cancels swap plans for Enterprise South Nature Park, McDonald Farm



FUTURE INDUSTRY

By phone, Commissioner Steve Highlander, R-Harrison, said he is happy with the idea to roll back the plan. He said what Wamp said was true -- the majority of people in his district, which encompasses neighborhoods near the park, were "adamantly against" the proposal, he said.

Commissioner Jeff Eversole, R-Ooltewah, also said during a phone call that

he's in support of the county's decision, pointing to the amount of public opposition.

"We're elected to represent the citizens of our county, and when the idea was thrown out there," Eversole said, "I think the community spoke."

He said the county does still need to zero in on bringing industry. He pointed to potential partnerships with East Ridge and Collegedale, as well as Chattanooga, to bring in more jobs.

Even so, he does not think the acreage at the nature park was the last chance to do so within Chattanooga city limits -- a point emphasized by Charles Wood, president of the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce, in a letter endorsing the proposal in October.

(READ MORE: Residents walk Enterprise South hills where Wamp plans industrial development)

"With existing acreage now fully absorbed, Chattanooga faces a pivotal moment: Unless we unlock additional land, we will no longer have the large, contiguous sites required to recruit the next original equipment manufacturer or transformational employer," Wood's letter said.

Wood did not respond to a request for comment in time for publication.

Eversole said the county should look at areas that have already had commercial activity but are now underused.

"If you go through Chattanooga and look at where we do have areas that have dried up, businesses have left, I think we need to be looking at, 'How

can we revitalize?" Eversole said.

'RADICALS'

In his statement, Wamp also said the nonprofit formed to oppose his plans, Save Enterprise South Nature Park, had overblown the harms that would be caused by the proposal.

"Given this decision, I encourage the recently formed nonprofit, Save Enterprise South Nature Park, to refund donations that were raised by overstating threats to the park," Wamp said. "Save ESNP's embrace of radical national environmentalist groups has undermined the credibility of what initially appeared to be a local grassroots effort."

Save Enterprise South Nature Park did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The nonprofit announced a partnership with the Southern Environmental Law Center on Monday, a hub of environmental lawyers and policy advocates with a goal of protecting the environment of the Southeastern U.S.

Save Enterprise South Nature Park was also joined by members of the Sierra Club on a Dec. 20 hike through the area marked for future industry. The Sierra Club is a national environmental advocacy nonprofit.

Renee Eldridge, who has lived in her Ooltewah home on the border of the park for decades, said she's upset with Wamp's statement about the nonprofit. She was one of several in her neighborhood who began meeting with the organization because she was opposed to the plans -- and she does

not consider herself radical, she said.

"I will not forget what Mayor Wamp did at election time," she said. "We are just normal, everyday American people. You came into our backyard and tried to take something from us. We said, 'No, we're gonna fight.' And we stood up and fought, and that's not being radical, that's just being American."

The proposal would have put industry in her backyard, she said.

(READ MORE: Hamilton County wants to amend Enterprise South Nature Park deed. It's happened before)

Eldridge, who is 64, has a lung disease. She was worried about how an increase in pollutants would have affected her daily life with industry a couple hundred feet from her door, she said.

Now, she's hopeful after getting results from organizing with her neighbors, she said, but still apprehensive. She donated money to Save Enterprise South Nature Park and she'd like the organization to hold on to it for future work, she said.

"I am very, very relieved. It feels like about 20 pounds has been taken off my shoulders," Eldridge said. "I do have concerns for the future, and we will be watching ... You keep my money. You use it for whatever you can use it for, I don't want it back."

Not everyone feels the same way.

April Eidson, who owns a local family farming operation in Soddy-Daisy,

wrote in a text message that she thinks Wamp bowed to undue pressure from the nonprofit because his seat will be up for election in August. The Enterprise South area -- containing the Volkswagen plant, Amazon and a few other company sites adjacent to the park -- was always meant to be used for industry, she wrote.

The park is preventing what should have been more growth, she wrote, and the 500 acres wouldn't have been noticed. The park is "grossly oversized," she said.

"So here we are decades down the road with prime industrial property with rails, interstate, sewer and water mains, and these radicals came in and shut down the community dialogue," Eidson said. "Only the radicals taking donations had a voice. These radicals brought in people that don't even live here."

Eidson has long been opposed to industry at McDonald Farm, and she said she was in support of swap proposal when it was first announced because it would protect the farm. Canceling the proposal is not a good sign, she said.

"That means reconsideration to me," she said.

Contact city and county reporter Siena Duncan at sduncan@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6354.

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Siena Duncan reports on the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County for the Times Free Press. She has a degree



in journalism from the University of Florida, where she earned Hearst, Mark of Excellence and Sunshine State awards. When she's not writing, she's attempting to pet her ornery cat Soup or getting lost in the mountains.

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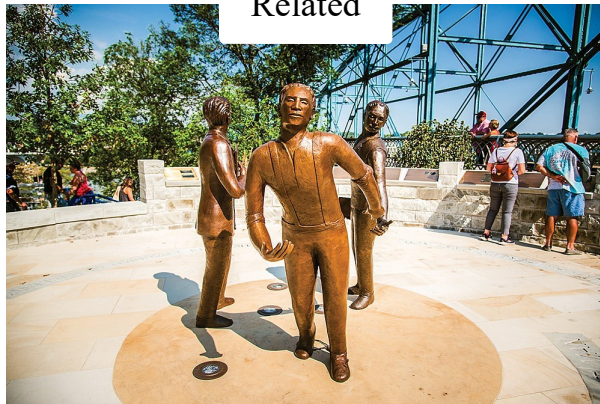
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