



EQUINE OPPORTUNITY

New group seeks to protect wild horses as area grows

BY JEFFREY S. HAMPTON THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

A wild foal so new its knees wobbled drew a crowd of onlookers Wednesday.

Every mile or so, another small group of wild horses – typically a foal or two, a few mares and a stallion – stood near the breakers, delighting tourists.

The wild horses draw thousands of vacationers annually to the four-wheeldrive beaches north of Corolla on Currituck County's Outer Banks .

Sparked by leaders of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, a group has formed to preserve the horses' environment but still allow home construction and tourism. The group firmed up its goals and its name last week.

"We just saw houses going up very, very fast," said Lynne Wilson, chairwoman of Can Our Actions Save Tomorrow – COAST for short. "Every house that goes up eats a little more of their habitat."

The group plans to meet next week with the Fruitville Beach Civic Association, which represents homeowners in the four-wheel-drive area.

"I have not heard anybody come out and say, 'I hate horses,'" said Mym Fowler, secretary for the civic association. "This is all good news to me. I'm one of those people who says the horses were here first."

One of the goals is to create a natural corridor running north to south along the 12-mile-long strip between the end of N.C. 12 and the Virginia line, an area of about 10,500 acres. The corridor would be a continuous stretch where the horses and other wildlife could roam freely.

The Currituck National Wildlife Refuge and other government and private agencies have set aside hundreds of acres between the area's communities. Can Our Actions Save Tomorrow hopes property owners will be willing to dedicate land to connect areas already preserved. One example is Wild Horse Estates, where developer Jay Bender set aside 70 acres to be left open.

The group also hopes to convince homeowners to maintain natural vegetation in their yards, avoid concrete drives, leave most of the trees and forgo surrounding their property with a fence, Wilson said.

Members of the group include Tim Cooper, manager of the Currituck National Wildlife Refuge; Jan DeBlieu of the North Carolina Coastal Federation; and Sharon Twiddy of Twiddy & Co., one of largest real estate businesses on the Currituck Outer Banks.

The general feeling among many of the area's 150 or so full-time residents , and many others who own property and come seasonally, is to leave the area as it is – no paved roads, no stores, no doctor's offices, no post office, no public water or sewer and no traffic lights.

For now, the most modern conveniences are a recycling center and a volunteer fire department. Wide enough only for a single car to pass, the roads don't follow the straight course shown on maps. Instead, they wind around big mud holes, trees and overgrown brush. Wild horses graze where they want, often to the thrill of visitors who want to see them and take pictures.

Multimillion-dollar homes line the oceanfront, many of them renting for as much as \$50,000 a week. Oceanfront lots range in price from \$875,000 to just more than \$1 million.

In the north beach area, there are 3,100 lots platted, according to county records. Through 2003, 469 were occupied with homes. In 2004, 41 new-construction building permits were issued. The number of 2005 permits was not available.

About 65 wild horses live north of Corolla, usually dividing into smaller herds of six to eight. Much of their range includes 400 acres of the Currituck National Wildlife Refuge, but they often venture into communities such as Carova.