

negative impacts of plastic bags and Styrofoam. Surveys showed overwhelming support from both citizens and businesses for a ban on both. The city councils of Asheville, Woodfin, Black Mountain, Weaverville and Buncombe County were in favor of the bans.”

— **Ken Brame**

“In 2022, 19 miles of the French Broad River were listed as impaired due to bacteria pollution. MountainTrue found that the biggest culprit is stormwater runoff from farms. This year, we successfully secured \$2 million in the North Carolina budget to help farmers in the French Broad Basin fence cattle out of streams and make improvements to reduce runoff. The French Broad River is a vital natural and economic resource that needs to be protected.”

— **Bob Wagner**

“Securing the chance to create a county park on Deaverview Mountain. The mountain was slated for development, but now we have three years to raise funds to create what will be the most scenic county park in the Eastern United States.”

— **Jay Leutze**

“RiverLink was delighted to activate and connect Karen Cragnolin Park’s greenway this past September in honor of our founder. Karen Cragnolin Park, a former industrial brownfield, perfectly embodies Karen’s commitment to promoting both the environmental and economic vitality of the watershed. In addition, we completed the Southside Community Stormwater Project, a collaborative effort to address water quality issues and the needs of a marginalized community.”

— **Lisa Raleigh**

What was the biggest setback for local environmental initiatives in 2023?

“It was the N.C. General Assembly adding a provision in the final budget bill that prohibited local governments from regulating single-use plastics and Styrofoam containers. This happened just as our local towns and Buncombe County were poised to pass local bans. Unfortunately, the current supermajority in Raleigh had more concern for industry lobbyists in Raleigh than the wishes of local businesses and citizens or the health impacts on people from microplastics in our water and air.”

— **Ken Brame**

“Our policy and funding for wildlife crossings has to keep up with all this road building and expansion. We have taken baby steps as far as some initial funding for better underpasses that wildlife can use, but the time

to fund safe crossings for migrating elk, bears, deer, turtles, right down to salamanders, is before bridges and culverts are installed. Retrofitting is really expensive, and the costs of wildlife and automobile collisions are catastrophic for all involved. Our natural landscape must become more connected, more climate resilient, and we are missing opportunities right now.”

— **Jay Leutze**

“Two come to mind. In March, the U.S. Forest Service adopted a management plan that puts 100,000 acres of old-growth forests and several endangered bat species at risk. Then in September, as we were about to win ordinances banning single-use plastic bags in Asheville and Buncombe County, the state legislature, at the 11th hour, inserted an amendment into the budget that prevents local governments from regulating or banning food packaging, including single-use plastic bags.”

— **Bob Wagner**

“The single-use plastic coalition was an amazing example of environmental leadership, collaboration and support in our region and was backed by science, legal policy, advocacy and a pathway forward. It was disappointing when the General Assembly passed a budget that precluded pursuing this initiative.”

— **Lisa Raleigh**

What should be the top environmental priority in WNC in 2024?

“Loss of farmland. Small farmers are in crisis, and conservation can help keep our farmers in business. Buncombe County does a better job than any other county in the state in helping farmers find conservation solutions that can keep them on the land, but the headwinds are fierce. Federal agriculture policy continues to incentivize consolidation and a business model that disadvantages the family farm in favor of corporate giants. WNC’s economy and culture evolved with close-to-the-soil family farms. Converting more of these productive operations to residential subdivisions would be a tremendous loss to us all.”

— **Jay Leutze**

“RiverLink believes addressing the French Broad River’s water quality — and the sediment loading that is greatly compromising it — needs to be an environmental priority throughout the region. We must take some pressure off this economic backbone and utilize green stormwater infrastructure. With the ongoing development boom throughout the county and watershed, this is the only way to reduce the sediment loading, flooding vulnerabil-

ity and existing water quality impairments. Too much is at stake not to.”

— **Lisa Raleigh**

“Tackling our region’s housing crisis. Housing as an environmental issue? Yes, because we desperately need more housing, and where and how that housing is built is incredibly important. By embracing missing-middle housing and building closer to public amenities and where infrastructure already exists, we can meet our housing needs in a way that is more climate friendly and energy efficient, minimizes vehicle miles traveled and reduces sprawling development that encroaches on our forests, farms and green spaces.”

— **Bob Wagner**

“Doing everything we can to fight climate change. Local governments should be transitioning to electric vehicles, making their buildings more energy efficient, creating resilience hubs in vulnerable neighborhoods, and passing a green bond to fund these types of initiatives. We also need to educate people on the economic incentives available to people to buy electric vehicles, heat pumps, induction stoves and making their homes more energy efficient.”

— **Ken Brame** 

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