

## **Linking Lands and Communities in the Land of Sky Region of Western North Carolina**

**Land of Sky Regional Council, Total Cost: \$208,000, FHWA Share: \$104,000**

*Period of Performance: 24 months, Dates: March 17, 2008 – March 17, 2010*

*AOTR: Mary Gray, Grant Project Website: <http://www.linkinglands.org/>*

### **Project Goals**

The Land of Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) *Eco-Logical* grant project aims to develop a regional conservation network that feeds ranked natural and cultural resources data into a GIS model. The model can then be used as a guide for conservation and development efforts in the Land of Sky region.

### **Project Activities**

The LOSRC project team completed three component assessments consisting of individual water quality, wildlife habitat and biodiversity, and agriculture models. The next steps of the project will be to integrate the ranked data from each of the three assessments into a GIS model. The resulting GIS-based maps will show a unified green infrastructure network that will be reviewed and updated to consider natural phenomena and projected development.

The grant project required LOSRC to develop new working relationships with local and State agencies and NGOs. LOSRC also conducted a series of open houses and prepared educational materials to help the public interpret the assessments. This has led to a greater regional awareness of ecological systems, data sharing, and integration with transportation and other regional plans among all partner organizations.

### **Key Accomplishments**

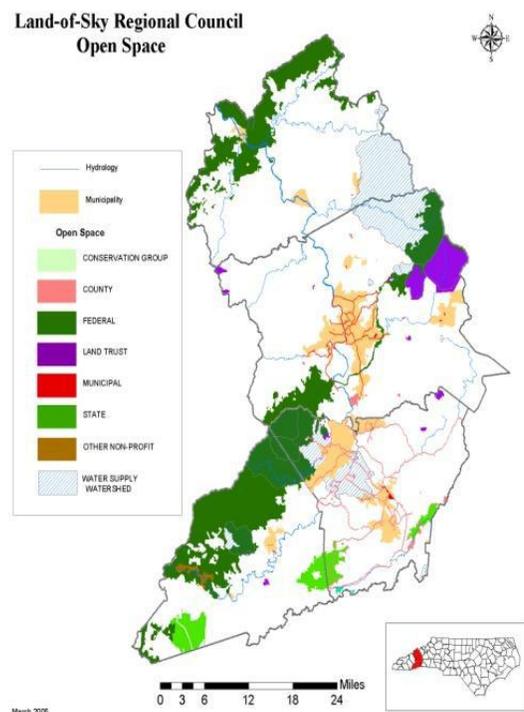
The LOSRC *Eco-Logical* project has already gained regional, State, and Federal recognition. LOSRC staff plans to be involved in data collaboration and technology transfer with State and Federal agencies after the grant's completion. An additional accomplishment is that the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in North Carolina committed to replicate LOSRC's "*Eco-Logical* planning process" for the rest of the counties in the area through its General Management Plan. LOSRC will serve as the pilot for this approach.

### **Challenges**

LOSRC initially struggled to create a process and a model that fit the sustainable development ethic of its region. The project team overcame this challenge by allotting additional time to develop an updatable, transparent model. LOSRC faced challenges in sustaining participation from local government stakeholders and matching the project schedule with other major regional planning efforts, such as the LRTP. The project team has expanded its outreach efforts with local governments to educate them about how to incorporate the network into their long-range plans, even amid differing project schedules.

### **Future Steps**

LOSRC believes its green infrastructure network will provide data to inform project selection for inclusion in the State Transportation Improvement Plan, a process which is currently mostly qualitative but is moving towards quantitative metrics. LOSRC also hopes that FHWA's role in *Eco-Logical* will encourage the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) to utilize the green infrastructure network in future transportation planning.



**Figure: Land of Sky Regional Council open space map.**