

Save The UMCA Woods



respect the locals

The Final Straw Radio - July 13, 2025

Then, you'll hear Callie and Heather of Friends of the Woods talking about their campaign to save the UNCA woods, 45 acres in Asheville's Five Points neighborhood from destruction by the university in a scheme to build a 5,000 seat soccer stadium, market rate housing and retail spaces. You can learn more at www.SaveUNCAWoods.org.

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Callie: I am Callie Warner, and I am one of the folks who have been campaigning against the destruction of the UNCA forest.

Heather: And my name is Heather Rayburn. I'm an alumni of UNCA. I've lived next to UNCA for the last 30 years. I'm a native to Asheville, and my hobby is I go out and do butterfly surveys for the Carolina Butterfly Monitoring Project and the Carolina Butterfly Society.

TFSR: Very cool. We got in touch because you're a part of an effort to stop the destruction of the forest in North Asheville's Five Points neighborhood, calling itself Friends of the Woods. When I lived in the area and walked through the forest, the neighborhood called it the Experimental Forest. I wonder if you could tell us a bit about the dimensions of the woods, the communities—human and non—that reside in or use the forest, and what distinguishes it inside of Asheville.

Heather: Okay, well, it's 45 acres. It has been used by professors and students for experiments, and it's been used recreationally by the community as a place to walk and enjoy nature. The students love it as a place to get away and get a mental health break. It supports a huge variety of species of wildlife. I have recorded 13 species of butterfly in there, but there's surely more because it's not part of my regular survey route. A neighbor, over the years, has recorded more than 100 different species of birds. It's a spot where the northern long-eared bat spends part of its life cycle, and that's an endangered species. You regularly see bears there. There's a photographer who takes a lot of pictures there, and he documented great horned owls this year, and they are there every year. Everybody enjoys seeing them.

It's a place where you meet your neighbors. So many people, including local politicians, reminisce about this property. These guys, they think, "Oh, it's just neighbors who care about this," but so many people have gone to UNCA or live next to UNCA and enjoy this rare place. It's a rare urban forest. This is a bigger issue than just our neighborhood. People love these woods, and they appreciate these woods. We've got Brian Turner, who used to work at UNCA, he's our state representative. He exercised in those woods. Carrie Wells, who's on the county commission, she used to live near those woods. She said she went there every day. So it's a really important place for people and a really beautiful place for people and animals.

Callie: And we have about 14,000 signatures from folks who have spent time in those woods, and they're from all walks of life in Asheville, all corners of Buncombe County. I don't live near those woods but I care deeply about them, especially in

light of the hurricane. Over 40% of Buncombe County's trees were damaged and destroyed during the hurricane, and it doesn't make sense, especially now, that we have an urban forester in the budget. Asheville has got to recognize that it needs to be saving its trees, not destroying more, especially when there are other places on campus. In this 210 acre millennial campus, there are other places within that designation that make much more sense and would be much less destructive.

Heather: By the way, Callie's on the tree commission.

Callie: Yeah, I've been on the tree protection task force for about 10 years now, and we worked so hard to get an urban forester in the budget, and now we have it. But the thought of destroying this particular forest, especially because it's uphill of the botanical gardens. When you take that much it's a carbon sequestration of like 2.2 million gallons of water a year, and you can't expect to wipe out an entire forest and replace it with impervious surfaces and not expect to have serious runoff and flooding. Broadway already floods, and we know how much more flooding we're getting now that our rivers are geologically different and transformed permanently. We are going to be seeing a whole lot more flooding so it's important that we recognize that there are places for development and there are places that should not be. Our air, our water, it's all connected.

The students come to UNCA because of the forests and because of these mountains. When we were on campus, I would go to campus and just interview students. "How do you feel about these woods? What brought you to UNCA?" All of them said it was because of these beautiful mountains. They love nature. The chancellor mentioned that she wanted to attract a different kind of student. And I don't exactly know what she means by that, but I will say as a master's person from NC State in landscape architecture, I can't see the students that I was in school with at NC State coming to UNCA. There's a difference here. This school grew out of the Black Mountain College. It had a lot of the arts and liberal arts, and all of that is the foundation of this university. It doesn't make sense to try and attract different students when other state-run universities get those students.

Heather: Maybe we should tell the audience about how this came about.

TFSR: You've told us a lot about the ecological importance and the cultural relevance of the woods, but your website saveuncawoods.org talks about some other interesting historical things. Would you mind referencing a few of those real quick for the audience?

Callie: Well, part of it was a dairy farm.

Heather: In 1960 there was a public bond issued to buy this property, I believe. Then they expanded the university. So this property was bought with a public bond. The school is funded mostly with public dollars that come from the state legislature. The people who get to choose who are on the Board of Governors is the majority in the state legislature, which right now is the Republican Party. We're a non-partisan group, because we want the university to thrive, and we believe this is important to everybody, no matter what their party. But they choose who's on the Board of Governors. They choose people who don't have the same values as us.

There's dollar value in what you don't destroy, right? But the way that they think is, "Higher education, we don't want to fund that," because they think that it's indoctrination; liberal arts, "Who needs philosophy?" and that sort of thing. They're wanting to turn the school more into STEM. But guess what? Kids who go to schools for STEM love green space, and they need it too. So they starve universities of public funding. Now the Board of Governors, the UNCA Board of Trustees want to take this public property and go into public-private partnerships with developers to raise funds that they're starved off from the very party that's keeping them underfunded. What they've come up with is this thing called Millennial Campus Legislation. It actually started under a Democrat, and it doesn't have to be a sinister thing. You could go into a public-private partnership and build a research facility or something educational. But what it's turned out to be is that it's going away from the mission of education into making the mission of the schools into developers.

Callie: As Heather said, it is supposed to be these millennial campuses, since the money just goes back into the Millennial Campus. It's unclear if any of it would go into education at all. Basically the developer gets financed with a mix of money from a university's endowment and foundation as well as from private developers. What happens is they're going to have, like, a 90-year lease. The developer will have this decades-long lease and the ownership of the valuable revenue generating buildings, the university will get a portion of that revenue, plus new student housing, all without having to spend taxpayer money, which sounds great, but because of legislation that is before the legislature now got slipped into the budget, the 700 page budget, is a bill that basically exempts millennial campuses from any environmental oversight, and that has been witnessed as a negative thing at Western Carolina. On their millennial campus, they built this housing, and it ended up damaging the student housing that was below it in a mud slide. Neither the city, the county, nor Western Carolina itself, were able to do anything to hold the developer accountable.

Heather: They got 16 notices of violation for erosion problems, and Western Carolina said, "Oh, we're sorry this happened, but our hands are tied because of this

long term lease.” They moved students in there before all this mess was fixed, and they’re like, “We’ll do better next time.” And the way that this legislation works is that the university asked for certain parcels of their property to be called Millennial Campus, and a millennial campus property is then exempt from the Olmstead Act, which is a law in North Carolina that says that a government can’t be in competition with private business because it’s an unfair advantage. So the millennial campus gives an exemption to that, and then the university goes to this Board of Governors and says, “Will you designate this property as a millennial campus?” And they’re like, “Oh, sure,” because then the university suddenly becomes, what would you say, in economic development. That’s suddenly what their purpose is. So UNCA, they say, “Oh, we’re so broke and poor.” Well, okay, when I’m having problems with my budget, what I do is I cut back. I don’t go and into a whole new venture. I cut back. What they do is they say, “Oh, we don’t have any capital to expand our campus.” Well, maybe that’s not what you should be doing.

Edward Abbey said, “growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.” In our way of doing things, as Americans, it’s like, grow, grow, grow, even though resources are limited. So what their answer is to their budget problems and their demographic problems—because fewer people are going to college—their answer to attract people is, “Let’s develop every bit of green space that we have.” And you would think, if they had a more progressive mindset, they would say, “Well, let’s develop the surface parking lots first or land that’s already cleared.”

Callie: Like the Health Adventure site, which is across from these 45 acres across Broadway. It’s already been destroyed of trees, and it’s a perfect place to put the housing.

Heather: Yeah, it’s been sitting there for 10 years, but they have super grand intentions. They want to turn this campus into something way bigger.

Callie: The other thing, too, is that they want to build a 5000 seat soccer arena. The question that I have is UNCA plans to seek \$29 to \$30 million in public funds, and the rest they expect the developer to put in. Well, we, the city of Asheville just committed \$30 million last year to the redevelopment of the tourist stadium. So that is coming out of our tax dollars. So we foot the bill for the McCormick field, and then we’re going to also foot the bill for this 5000 seat arena.

And the other thing, it’ll be used maybe 90 additional dates for concerts and events, in addition to being used by four soccer teams, which would be the UNCA men’s and women’s and Asheville City men’s and women’s. But the community should question the feasibility of that, because soccer schedules dominate April, May, and June and September and October. That only leaves July and Au-

gust for the outside events that UNCA is suggesting, and these two months are typically the very least desirable for outdoor concerts due to the heat and higher chance of thunderstorms.

So when you look at the various large event spaces, Asheville currently has from Highland Brewery to what used to be Rabbit Rabbit (and has changed its name downtown to something, I can't remember what it is), to Pisgah, we have all these breweries that have large outdoor spaces for concerts. Asheville is not big enough to sustain that much, and we would be paying for it. I think that is something that we want the university to do some real serious market research on, and they have not done that.

Heather: It doesn't seem like they've done any market research. They just came up with it. They pulled this out of their pantaloons. At other campuses, they go into a public-private partnership, say with a hotel. They did this in Charlotte. With the hotel, they don't have to put up any of their money. Marriott puts up the money to build a hotel. They get a lease. That money they get from the lease, they can only put it into their other millennial campus projects. They can't put it into their general budget. But you know, there are these shell games that they do. If they have their some sort of conference at the the Marriott, they can use millennial campus money to run their conference, so they don't have to spend that other general budget. That's my understanding.

Callie: The other thing is, Brookings [Institute] did an article about these big arenas, and they said, America is in the midst of a sports construction boom, and new sports facilities costing at least \$200 million each have been completed in all these cities around America. So Asheville, and I'm sure the city council and our mayor are seeing this as looking ahead: "How do we build our tax base in Asheville? This is a way we can do it." It's on state-owned lands, so we're not getting the tax benefits from it.

So 10 facilities built in the '70s and '80s, including the Superdome in New Orleans, the Silver Dome in Pontiac, the now-obsolete Kingdom in Seattle, and Giants Stadium in the New Jersey Meadowlands, each cause an annual federal tax loss exceeding \$1 million. So these these arenas are not making money, they are actually costing more, and that is an important thing to realize. We need to have market research done on "Will this actually make money?" Because what they're proposing is taking that 45 acres and putting a 5000 seat arena, plus a bunch of market-rate housing, not affordable housing for students, but market-rate housing.

There are three swales on that property. When it rains, those swales take the water. If you put pavement over those swales, and pavement on all of those 45 acres, you're going to end up with sinkholes.

Heather: They'll level that all out, Callie.

Callie: They'll level it all out. But it's like Merriman Avenue down there. We have sink holes from all the way up Merriman, because they built it over a swale and over a creek. You can't cover these things up and expect it not to eventually have sink holes. Imagine playing soccer and then things, you know, whatever.

Heather: So they have their property designated as millennial campus under this legislation, and that means that the local community has no say over it. It doesn't go through our technical review committee because of this legislation. It doesn't go to our city council like a project this size normally would. Then they stuck this new thing in the state budget to where it doesn't even have to go under a noise ordinance or whatnot.

So this is a publicly-funded school, and they're sitting on public property, and the people that are working in the shadows that want all this don't have to go under our tree ordinance. They don't have to take into consideration our climate goals here in Asheville and Buncombe County. UNCA is a publicly-funded school sitting on public property, and the people working in the shadows want \$29 million in public funding. They want to level our forest for the profit of private developers through millennial campus legislation that gives the public zero say in the project.

So we've gone and we've asked the city council, our local legislators, and next week we're asking the public to go to the county commission meeting, because our local people don't have legislative control over this project happening, but they do have a lot of soft power. And they can issue resolutions in favor of this forest staying, because there are so many good reasons for this forest to remain a forest. Not only good reasons that make sense to the community but to the university.

Callie: They just created a master's program in, what is it, Biology?

Heather: Yeah, environmental resilience. One of their biggest draws is the environmental undergraduate degree, and they want to destroy a forest for this ridiculous project that they don't seem to have even done any marketing research for. When the Chancellor presented it a couple of weeks ago to the Board of Governors' financial committee. She didn't even have a profit loss statement to share with them. Then they asked for that, and they asked, Art Pope asked, "Does your city council approve of this?"

Callie: The other thing is one of the members of the Tree Protection Task Force is a landscape architect who has done a lot of work in the I-26 corridor, and she did a lot of work in University of Georgia and Georgia Tech. She's brilliant. She went

over to where the existing soccer field is on campus, and measured everything: rise and run, the whole nine yards. And that existing soccer field is the place that a 5000 seat arena could go and should go. It has big lights already there. It's close to the highway. It has no neighborhood. It's not going to affect a very well-established, old neighborhood in Asheville known as Five Points. It has a parking deck. It can add more parking on top of the existing parking deck.

She did a design that basically makes that whole area, the sports area, and that would cost a lot less money than what it will cost for them to take out all those trees and destroy all of that and flatten everything, and do what they would have to do to the forest. Why do that when they already have a soccer field? If they instead took the design over and did what this landscape architect has done, and they kept the forest as it is, for classrooms and for all things, it would end up being such a boon to the university. We have other schools in North Carolina. Warren Wilson put this land in conservation, and they got a huge endowment for that, and alumni will give more money to the university if they save the forest and make their actions for within this millennial campus be environmentally good.

We have to think about this for future, especially in light of [Hurricane] Helene. It doesn't make sense for them to come in and put it there when they already have a soccer field. They can put all the housing over there on the Health Adventure site across Broadway, and they wouldn't have all this negativity from the community. UNCA has always worked with Asheville. It's been a really good partnership. This is going to destroy the relationship between the university and Asheville.

Heather: It is destroying it.

Callie: Yeah, and it's going to really destroy the desire—who's going to want to go to the arena when you realize that this arena and these buildings that they have proposed are right in the backyard of all these people who live in Five Points? Their property values are going to plummet.

Heather: Oh, they don't care.

Callie: They don't care, but there's no reason why the university has to do it the way they're doing it.

Heather: They're shameless. They released a plan with no buffer between this stadium and the neighborhood. The only tree buffer was around the Chancellor's house. And the Chancellor went to the Board of Governors, and she said, "Oh, this is just an empty piece of unused land." That's how they view this. But of course,

that's a lie, because it's not just a useless, unused piece of land. And she's going to get all kinds of bonuses for turning the campus around. But she's been here for more than a year. She is not registered to vote here. She is registered to vote in Hillsboro, where her farm is. She's going to ruin this place, get her bonuses and leave, and we're going to be left picking up the pieces, and as taxpayers paying for all their erosion, paying in misery and the urban heat island when we lose this forest...

TF SR: When you had gone to the city council meeting before, did you have much response? Are there any local politicians or developers that are pushing for the UNCA to do this thing or do they have any sort of leverage in there? Because it sounds like it's being decided at a state level anyway, right?

Heather: It's being decided at a state level. But we've got to come together as a community to start fighting for our place here. Bo Hess is all for a resolution. He just wrote an excellent guest editorial in the *Asheville Citizen Times*.

Callie: He's our city council member.

Heather: City council member. City council member Kim Roney wants to see a resolution passed. Drew Ball on the county commission wants to see UNCA talk to this community. They have ideas for how the city and county, along with land trusts, along with the community, could help UNCA achieve their goals without destroying this urban forest. Potentially monetizing it in a way that will be palatable to UNCA, to leave it as an amenity for the campus educational place, the outdoor labs. But also a woodland public park that would benefit everybody and that would further draw people here. It would also be a beautiful wildlife corridor that already links the botanical garden, the greenways, and all the wonderful native plant landscaping that UNCA is famous for.

Callie: And when you were asking about the rest of the city council, we haven't really gotten a read on the other city councils. Sage Turner, she sits on the Asheville-Buncombe Regional Sports Commission. So, we're asking Sage why UNCA is seeking public funding for the proposed Asheville City Soccer Club soccer stadium when the city council and the county commission and the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) have already promised their piggy banks to McCormick Field. If the stadium gets public money, then we'll have two shiny new venues clawing over the same handful of big events after sinking tax dollars into both. So we don't have any proof that McCormick Field is going to draw the concerts. We don't have any proof that we can have two big arenas in this size of town end up making money. It just does not, it doesn't, there's too many questions and too many loopholes.

What we are afraid of is that because of the history of what happened at Western Carolina and other millennial campuses, they could come in and wipe out the forest and then decide not to do anything. And then we would have lost this beautiful, valuable, incredibly important...

Heather: The economy could crash and then we'd be left with like the property down on Broadway for the last 10 years: no trees, just an empty lot.

But you're asking about local political support. Early on, a group from Save the Woods met with the mayor and she said that she couldn't say what was going there, but that Asheville would like it and she seemed like she was in favor of it.

We recently asked the people on our petition list if they would take action with a email that would go to all the decision makers and, but also our local, our local politicians. And so after more than a thousand people, more than a thousand emails went to all the city councilors, the county commissioners, the board of governors, the board of trustees... By the way, the board of trustees and board of governors, none of them have responded to emails. But after that, the mayor did respond to the emails saying that she, she hears us. She doesn't have any power to change this, but that she, she understands what's going on. And she has made some calls on our behalf and Maggie Allman has said that she's, she doesn't want to see this forest destroyed.

Callie: So what we have is a resolution that we are presenting to the city council. And we want four, if we can get four members of city council and the mayor to sign this resolution, basically saying that what UNCA wants to do is fine, but not where they want to do it. And that there are better ways to do it that are much more environmentally better and financially better. So if they sign the resolution, then even though they can't affect any of what happens, the fact that UNCA has always worked with the city means that this will be the first time that the university is just basically doing whatever they want to do, regardless of how the city feels and how the residents feel. And that is going to come back and bite them because you have to work with others, especially in a public institution, you have to be willing to compromise yourselves and to look at something like this and go, "you know what, you're right. This is in the wrong place."

TFSR: And so you're going to county commissioners up this coming or next week, I guess, right? Is it the 15th?

Heather: Well, yeah, the July 15th. And we would love your listeners to come out and, and, you know, speak out and say, we know that you can't affect this legally. But like Callie said, this university, even though they're operating as if we don't

matter, the people of Asheville and Buncombe County that we don't matter, their neighbors don't matter. Then the soccer club, the same thing. And we've talked to soccer fans that we've leafleted three of their games and the soccer people are like, "No, we don't need this forest to disappear. We don't want that." So, you know, we're not saying no to soccer.

We want your listeners to go talk because, you know, it's one thing like I've been an environmental activist for years and people think, oh, if I go to a protest, I've done my part, but we've got to do our part in a really active and quick way here. We've got to go talk to the political people.

On Friday, we're going, the UNC, a board of trustees are meeting. We've got to go, we've got to show up there. We've got to let them see the people that they're hurting face to face. Because so far there's, there's a board of governor, Carolyn Coward. She works in the same law office as Esther Manheimer. We want a meeting with her. We've sent, we've left voice messages. We've sent emails. She will not respond to us. We want a meeting with her. We want, we don't want to have an ugly confrontation. That's not what it's about. We want to talk to her human to human. You, this is what you're doing to this community.

Callie: And also to get answers. What, you know, since they have not done any mark, any kind of spreadsheets on any facts of how arenas, the success of arenas across the country, which is proving to not be successful. We're not even getting them to say, "Oh, maybe this isn't such a great idea."

The other thing I want to mention is that when we met with the chancellor and she said, we are going for a different kind of student, what she needs to understand is that the Gen Z crowd, they are extremely engaged in social and environmental issues. They are very concerned about transparency and authenticity. And they want to support a college that literally is walking the walk of the rhetoric they have in their brochures. And the UNCA rhetoric is sustainability and appreciation of trees. And Asheville is a tree city USA. Well, how do we keep that distinction? And how do we further that, which would be a much better for tourism... Tourists don't want to go to a decimated area that's hot. They've got that in their own hometown of Charlotte. They want to come here because it's cooler and it's greener and it's connected. And there are all these pathways and beautiful neighborhoods that they can walk through. So, you know, if they, the Gen Z crowd is not going to be happy if this forest is gone and they're not going to come here.

Heather: I think when she says a different kind of student, she's talking about... there's a cultural shift at UNCA. You know, they painted over the Black Lives Matter mural. They got rid of the pride flags. Who's this different kind of student? And can you ensure that this different kind of student comes here? Because, yeah, like

Callie said, the young people, they're concerned, even her different kind of student, whoever that is, they're concerned about the environment and they want to come here for the green. It's just, this is just all like a horrible nightmare that these people are dreaming up in their heads.

Callie: These are major risks when you don't get the citizen & city council support.

Heather: Major risks and your community. And not only that, they're not working transparently. And the student government, the SGA, student government at UNCA, they passed a resolution. They don't want to see this forest go. But they also are really ticked about the lack of transparency and lack of listening on behalf of this new chancellor and this whole shift away from the things that they think are important.

We have asked, and they're legally obligated to fulfill their public records request. We have public records requests that are outstanding since January 29th. They will not answer our questions. They will not release those public documents.

Callie: And so how are we supposed to feel safe and comfortable with their decision-making when they have been doing all this backdoor dealings? We don't trust them. They have not given us any reason to trust them. When we have been totally open, willing to talk to them, wanting to share, wanting to come up with best solutions that the community and the university can work together, that has been our goal from the start, which is why we have people from all over the county joining us in this. And a lot of them love soccer. My son played soccer. I love soccer. But I don't want to wipe out this beautiful forest to get it when they already have a site that they could put it on.

So we are really asking, and anyone who's interested needs to go to saveuncawoods.org and sign our petition. And we are raising money. We have a fiscal sponsor out of Raleigh, so we're a 501c3 through them and we're getting legal help. And we need to raise money because all of this costs money. We've got a billboard on Merriman Avenue that we're going to have for another month. We want to do billboards. We also have to reach Raleigh with this because the legislature and Board of Governors are the ones deciding all this. And so our marketing needs to get across the state and the urgency of this message. So we really want to get anyone and everyone who survived the hurricane who is still having PTSD from the loss of trees and wants to see Asheville rebuild with true resiliency, environmental resiliency, and choices that are going to be long-term benefits, they need to come on our website because we're building this bigger than this 45 acres.

TFSR: Thank you so much for this conversation., I really appreciated it.

THE
**Final
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A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW



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