



Conserving Oak Ridge through Easements (CORE) Initiative 2024-2025 Grant Information

What is the purpose of the CORE Initiative?

The CORE Initiative was created to further the Town's goal of preserving significant open space and historic structures in Oak Ridge. The initiative educates property owners about what's involved in placing an easement on their property. If a property owner wishes to pursue placing an easement on their property, the initiative may also provide grant funding to offset the costs involved.

What is a conservation/preservation easement?

A conservation or preservation easement is a legal agreement between a property owner and an easement-holding organization such as Piedmont Land Conservancy or Preservation North Carolina that limits the future use of the property in specific ways. For example, an open space easement could allow trails and recreational use and protect key landscape features, while prohibiting residential or commercial development. In the case of a historic structure, an easement could allow interior changes as well as additions that preserve the building's historic exterior as viewed from the street, while prohibiting demolition.

Easements are completely voluntary and cannot be made without the approval and active participation of the property owner. Once an easement is placed on a property, the easement remains in place in perpetuity and is difficult, if not impossible, to remove. Easements don't change the ownership of the property, although they do create binding legal restrictions that travel with the property regardless of ownership. Because easements are legal agreements, they take time to finalize – typically, a minimum of six months.

Easements are monitored by the organization that holds the easement (for example, Piedmont Land Conservancy or Preservation North Carolina) and are recorded with the property deed, making it incumbent on the current property owner and any future property owners to maintain the property according to the easement agreement, which details allowed and prohibited uses.

What costs do the CORE grants cover?

The partner organization holding the easement – either Piedmont Land Conservancy or Preservation North Carolina – charges an up-front fee for monitoring the property in perpetuity to make sure that the terms of the easement are enforced. This fee varies based on the size of the property, its value, and the extent of the use restrictions, but can range from \$6,000 to \$20,000. CORE grants can cover up to the full cost of this monitoring fee, which is paid directly to the partner organization. Additional costs that may be eligible for reimbursement include property surveys and related documentation, recording costs, and title insurance. Appraisal fees and personal legal fees are not eligible for grant reimbursement and must be paid by the property owner.

What are the criteria for the CORE grants?

Criteria for the two types of CORE grants are described below:

1. *CORE Grants for Historic Structures*

To be eligible for a CORE grant for historic structures, the building must be located in Oak Ridge and be at least 75 years old. It must also be of documented architectural, historic, or cultural significance and contribute to the historic fabric and unique character of Oak Ridge. Other considerations that may prioritize grant funding:

- a. Overall significance of the property
- b. Property lacks the protections of the Historic District, or is in danger of demolition, insensitive development, or other physical jeopardy
- c. Property is visible to the public or offers public access
- d. Overall size of the building and surrounding property is significant
- e. Property is adjacent to or otherwise connected via public trails or walkways to other easement properties

2. **CORE Grants for Open Space**

To be eligible for a CORE grant for open space, the property must be located in Oak Ridge and be comprised of woodland, farmland, parkland, or a combination of these. Properties with significant natural features such as scenic or open vistas, woodlands, streams, lakes/ponds, wildlife habitats, wetlands, historic farmland, or other forms of natural heritage are of special interest.. Other considerations that may prioritize grant funding:

- a. Significance of the property's natural features
- b. Level of need for a conservation easement to protect the property from development or encroachment
- c. Visibility of the property to the public
- d. Public access to the property and connectivity to other easement-protected properties
- e. Size of the property

How are grant decisions made?

Grant applications are evaluated by the Oak Ridge Conservation Easement Committee in collaboration with the town's partner organizations.

Are there tax implications?

Easements may reduce a property's value; in such cases, the owner may be able to deduct the value of the assessed value of the easement (calculated as the original appraisal value, less the assessed value of the property with the easement in place) from federal taxes as a charitable contribution; the reduced value will also be reflected in future property tax valuations. Since the Town of Oak Ridge cannot provide tax guidance, property owners considering easements are encouraged to discuss these matters with both their personal accountant and attorney.

How can I learn more?

Residents or others who own significant open space or historic properties in Oak Ridge and are interested in learning more about the CORE Initiative and possible grant funding are encouraged to call Town Hall at 336.644.7009 for more information. For information about how our partner organizations manage easements, visit Piedmont Land Conservancy's website at www.piedmontland.org/how/ (for open space easements) or Preservation North Carolina's website at <http://www.presnc.org/get-help/easements-covenants/>.

What's the next step if I'm interested in placing an easement on my property?

If you're interested in placing an easement on your property, the next step is to contact the Town of Oak Ridge Planning Director to discuss the project. If the project appears eligible, you will be invited to complete a grant application, which will be shared with the appropriate partner organization (either Piedmont Land Conservancy or Preservation North Carolina). As a reminder, easements are completely voluntary and property owners are encouraged to consider every aspect of a possible easement throughout the process, which typically takes a minimum of six months.