

Development plans draw firestorm

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A proposal by developer Jim Anthony to discharge 5.25 million gallons of treated wastewater a month into the North Saluda River and to build a golf course along about two-and-a-half miles of the stream has sparked a protest in Greenville.

Groups as diverse as the Sierra Club and the League of Women Voters have joined in an e-mail letter-writing campaign to oppose the plans for the Cliffs at Mountain Park, a development under construction off state Route 11 near the intersection with U.S. 25 in northern Greenville County.

There was some urgency to the letter drive as the deadline for comment on the Cliffs proposals was two days away as news spread of the plans. Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, started the letter drive with an e-mail to close supporters of his organization asking that they file protests with the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – the two agencies responsible for licensing the plans for Mountain Park.

Upstate Forever's letter said the Cliffs' plans would hurt the North Saluda River, which is an important trout stream.

DHEC and the state Department of Natural Resources rates the stream as

freshwater, not as trout water, which carries less-stringent quality standards than those in streams with reproducing populations of trout. The North Saluda, upstream of Mountain Park, does carry the trout water designation from about the North Saluda Reservoir dam to the North Carolina state line.

Dan Rankin, who stocks trout for the state DNR, called the North Saluda a "put-and-take" fishery around the Mountain Park site. That means fish are stocked, but not expected to survive through the year due to water quality and temperature issues.

"The fact that most of North Saluda isn't rated as trout water doesn't demean the stream's use as a put-and-take fishery," Rankin said.

DHEC's Jeff Debessonnet said streams often have uses and qualities that don't fit the categorizations.

"A freshwater designation is a pretty high quality and we'll require that any treatment plant meet those standards," he said.

The "low water" stream flow for the North Saluda is about 4.8 million gallons a day and the 175,000 gallons of wastewater that would be discharged into the river daily would be about 4 percent of that total, he said.

Ronald L Sobczak, chairman of the Upstate branch of the Sierra Club wrote, "We agree with Upstate Forever that this

discharge would have a very large negative impact on the Saluda River and would set a precedent for other large discharges into our mountain rivers and streams. It would release chemicals that would adversely affect the trout habitat in the Saluda River. It would require use of large amounts of municipal water from the Greenville Water System, which is particularly a problem with the drought we are facing now."

If the state Legislature passes proposed changes to state riparian law, projects such as Mountain Park would face much more public scrutiny since they would draw more than the 3 million gallons of surface water a month that triggers a permitting process.

The issue of a new golf course along the North Saluda and "piping or impounding about half a mile of the river's tributaries" raises other significant issues for the stream, Wyche said.

Dennis Chastain, a Pickens County environmentalist and sitting member of the state's drought response committee, said the issue is precedent-setting for the mountainous region of the state. "For the first time, we must deal with the nitty-gritty side of development in the mountains. What we do now will have a great effect on what the region looks like 20 years down the road."

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