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Wildlife Service wants Cliffs to suspend golf course plans
Federal agency, local environmentalists fear development will harm Saluda River

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By David Dykes
BUSINESS WRITER
ddykes@greenvillenews.com

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants an Upstate developer to suspend plans for a Gary Player-designed golf course in northern Greenville County until the project's impact on the North Saluda River and surrounding environment can be determined.

Officials of the federal agency, a bureau within the Department of the Interior, said that based on their review of information submitted by The Cliff Communities Inc. for its Mountain Park course, "it appears that the proposed project contains significantly more adverse environmental impacts" than described in public notices filed in connection with the development.

Jim Anthony, an Upstate developer who is founder and owner of The Cliffs Communities, and company officials couldn't be reached for comment.

The South Carolina chapter of the Sierra Club and Greenville-based Upstate Forever have raised questions about aspects of the development plan, including a proposal to discharge 175,000 gallons of wastewater a day into the North Saluda, a situation they said would pose a risk to an important trout stream.

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They also are concerned about the Cliffs' plans to build the golf course along 2 1/2 miles of the river and the company's subsequent restoration efforts, which they said will involve "piping and/or impoundment" of about a half mile of tributaries to the North Saluda.

Those efforts will turn the river corridor into a "hardened and highly landscaped ditch" according to e-mails and letters from Upstate Forever and the Sierra Club's state chapter to members and supporters.

In an e-mail this week to conservation advocates and organizations, Upstate Forever officials said they had met with Cliffs representatives to discuss the environmental group's concerns and asked them to modify their approach to the project.

The company is considering the request but has made no commitment to change its existing plan, Upstate Forever officials said.

As proposed, the Mountain Park project will span approximately 5,000 acres in Travelers Rest. It is scheduled to include a private, gated community and a 300-acre pedestrian village patterned after mountainside towns in northern Italy.

The development also will include the new headquarters for the Gary Player Group.

Specifically, Fish and Wildlife officials said they are concerned about the proposed restoration efforts involved in moving and realigning the North Saluda to accommodate the golf course design.

The project's proposed impact on the North Saluda could constitute "significant degradation" under provisions of the Clean Water Act and adversely affect habitats of migratory songbirds, aquatic species and other wildlife, said Timothy N. Hall, field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We recommend the proposed project be held in abeyance until all impacts associated with the project are fully disclosed to allow for a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of potential impacts," Hall said in a letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Hall said the Cliffs' restoration plan includes "manipulating" the elevation of the so-called riparian zone to accommodate sodded fairways and building 17 golf cart-pedestrian bridges over the river.

The bridges would result in the placement of 64 pilings in approximately 11,000 linear feet of navigable waters, he said.

"This would likely result in navigational hazards and become a deterrence to river recreation by the general public," Hall said.

Upstate Forever urged its members and supporters to write appropriate federal and state agencies and notify them of their opposition to plans for the wastewater discharge and the golf course along the river.

The organization believes there are environmentally suitable alternatives, such as a "land-discharge" system that would apply treated effluent to the golf course instead of discharging it into the river, according to its chairman, Thomas Kester.

"We're not trying to stop the development," Kester said. "We're not opposed to what they're doing in concept."

"We're not going to design their (golf) course for them," he said, "but we want them to slow down a little bit and see if there's some environmentally sensitive design features they could put in their course and still be just as attractive a golf course."

In a letter Thursday to federal and state officials, the Sierra Club's interim director for South Carolina said state surveys have documented several aquatic species that would be "highly sensitive" to stream modification.

Cary D. Chamblee said the Sierra Club "highly values the resources associated with the North Saluda River and opposes the issuance of permits to the Cliffs to significantly alter this relatively pristine stream system and to risk additional stress upon already stressed fish populations."

Plans call for a "woody vegetated" buffer along only half of the riverbank that will consist primarily of planted trees and landscaping, not a true forest buffer, Chamblee said.

"To call this project 'restoration' is frankly, laughable," Chamblee wrote.

Clair Boatwright, a spokeswoman for the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, said the agency is reviewing public comments it has received.

"You understand that people have feelings about not wanting something somewhere," she said. "But what we have to act on is substantive regulatory deviations that we can base a decision on."

Last month, The Cliffs Communities and Clemson University announced a partnership to create a center to develop environmentally sensitive ways to build and manage golf courses.

Anthony said The Cliffs Communities would give Clemson \$250,000 over three years and build a \$100,000 research center at The Cliffs at Mountain Park, off State 11 just west of U.S. 25.

The goal is to use fewer chemicals and conserve more water in golf course management, Anthony said.
