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Upstate Forever to oppose Cliffs permits

Developer says plans to protect river don't require separate deal with group

By Ben Szobody
STAFF WRITER

The director of a local environmental group said Tuesday he will ask regulators to deny permits for the Cliffs at Mountain Park development because developer Jim Anthony won't put in writing to his group steps to protect the Saluda River.

Anthony, however, said his plan to protect the river is the most stringent in the area and he will put his plans in writing to county, state and federal regulators. He said there's no need for him to put his agreement in writing with Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, a private environmental group.

Anthony said he agrees with Wyche on many issues but that the leadership of Upstate Forever could change in the future, making it risky to sign anything with the group.

"We don't need another entity," he said.

A public meeting to be held by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control on Monday will provide another in a string of forums for the Cliffs and concerned residents to see and debate the latest particulars of the development with a Gary Player-designed golf course.

Heather Preston, DHEC's director of the water quality division, said the Cliffs will make a presentation, and the public can ask questions pertaining to a proposed water quality certification, which deals with work done with fill material in wetlands and along rivers.

Anthony said he will describe new details about the river's buffer, which is now among the most prominent citizen concerns with the project.

Wyche said he thought he had already resolved some of the concerns of environmentalists and area residents, and he drafted a joint letter for the two parties to sign.

"If they won't commit in writing to some of these conditions I thought we'd worked out, we have to assume they're not going to follow through," he said.

Wyche has sent a letter to DHEC and the Army Corps of Engineers asking for denials, or, in the case of approval, 15 conditions including wider riverside buffers and limited changes to the river's channel. They include items Wyche said he and Anthony had agreed upon, as well as additional conditions Upstate Forever would like to see.

Anthony said he intends to show Monday he will create more of a river buffer than existed prior to his development, except for in two or three areas where golf greens abut the river. He said none of the area farmers observe such buffers.

He also said he is dealing with regulatory agencies including the Corps, the state Department of Natural Resources, DHEC, Greenville County and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and that his

plans will be filed in writing with them.

Wyche said he saw the changes Anthony said he was submitting to regulatory agencies and had "serious problems" with the wording, which prompted his effort to form a "clear, written agreement" that could also be submitted to the agencies.

He said the future leadership of Upstate Forever is irrelevant because the agreement would have been on file with the permitting agencies, not Upstate Forever.

Among the conditions Wyche now is asking for are 40-foot natural, native buffers measured from the top of the bank -- not the water -- and protections for existing trees, a ban on chemicals, a limit of five bridges and limited alterations to the river channel itself.

Wyche also asked for another public hearing and a Cliffs commitment to stocking the river with trout and allowing public access.

Preston said DHEC has been collecting public comments on the issue since last year, and that development changes were already shown to a small group of citizens. DHEC is coordinating Monday's meeting in response to a request for a larger "informational forum," she said.

The agency can deny a water quality permit, she said, but more typically negotiates conditions for approval, which, if granted, means there's a "reasonable assurance" water quality standards won't be violated.

Monday's public meeting is at 6:30 p.m. at the Hayes Fine Art Center at North Greenville University.

A separate permit concerning the development's wastewater discharge is on hold, Preston said, while the developer re-evaluates his options.

Residents and activists including Dianne Anastos, chairwoman of the newly formed Save Our Saluda, have said the project is the "biggest threat" to the river because of the waste that could end up there.

Anthony has said he hopes to resolve most of residents' concerns.

He revised his original DHEC request to discharge up to 175,000 gallons of treated wastewater into the river to instead treat the wastewater more thoroughly and spray it on the golf course.

Anthony said Tuesday the original plan was designed by engineers hired to come up with a standard and efficient wastewater plan, but that after hearing public concerns, he decided to avoid any river discharge. He said DHEC engineers told him such a plan would work except in case of a 100-year flood, since the golf course is in the floodplain, so he agreed to allow for potential river discharge in such an instance.

Anthony called that exception a "technicality" for an event that has "never happened" on area farms, and that even if it did, he'd be treating and releasing waste like every other property within 500 miles.

DHEC's director of water facilities permitting said in January that the plan has "the tightest set of limits that we have set anywhere in the state."
