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DHEC OKs permit for Cliffs course by river

Decision disappoints environmental groups concerned about North Saluda

By *Tim Smith*
CAPITAL BUREAU

COLUMBIA -- The board of the state's chief environmental agency Thursday unanimously approved a permit for a proposed golf course along the North Saluda River, with disappointed opponents of the project saying they'd likely push their environmental concerns to a judge.

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control board's vote was unanimous, though some board members urged developer Jim Anthony's company to reduce the planned 16 bridges across the Saluda and nine spots where players will hit balls across the waterway.

The golf course is part of a planned 5,000-acre gated community, The Cliffs at Mountain Park, near the intersection of State 11 and U.S. 25. The Gary Player-designed course still faces review by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever and a former chairman of the DHEC board, said afterward he was disappointed in the decision and that a coalition of groups would likely appeal the decision to an administrative law judge.

Wyche said experts hired by the environmental groups have been unable to find other golf courses in the nation that cross a trout river that many times.

"There's no precedent for it anywhere in the United States," he said. "It just makes the decision all the more troubling."

The DHEC board voted after a brief closed-door meeting to receive legal advice on the issue.

Paul "Bo" Aughtry, DHEC's chairman and a Greenville developer, said while those opposing the golf course had raised several issues, the relevant one for the board was a matter of water quality.

He said before the closed-door session that while the river is classified as navigable, he doesn't believe someone in a canoe can travel down it because of obstructions and mounds of sediment.

"This is not an unscathed, untouched, pristine river by any stretch," he said. "As a concerned citizen of Greenville County, my observation is -- and I don't live on the river -- that on balance this will be an improvement of this stream. I think the end result will be much better than what is there today."

Aughtry agreed with the lawyer for the developer that farming upstream from the project had "degraded this stream horrifically."

Jimmy Chandler, the lawyer for the environmental groups, disagreed with Aughtry's description of the waterway, noting that some in the room had traveled down the river by canoe and that the ecosystem around it contained 400 species of rare plants and more species of trees than in all of Europe.

The major issue for the environmental groups is how much effort the law requires of a developer to

consider alternatives, their lawyer said.

Wyche argued that not enough effort had been made to consider either relocating the golf course or reducing the number of crossings. One expert hired by the group told the board the course could still maintain its championship design with three or four crossings and 50-foot buffers to the river.

"It is very clear that there was not a thoughtful and careful analysis of all feasible alternatives for this golf course," Wyche said. "We are not saying The Cliffs should not have a golf course. The question is where it should be located."

Tommy Lavender, a lawyer representing The Cliffs, said three sites were considered but two were forested and had more slope than was desirable for a golf course.

Aughtry and others on the board said they understood the logic in The Cliffs' picking the already cleared acreage in the parcel for the golf course. Cliffs Vice President Don Nikell said the bridges were required in part because players on the course will have to walk instead of using golf carts.

Initially the state Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had filed objections to the golf course, but both have withdrawn them, officials said Thursday.

"I personally went up and looked at that project," DNR Director John Frampton said of the golf course. "The work he's proposing to do on that river is going to enhance it. We made some suggestions for some alterations, and he took every one of the suggestions that we made."

Cliffs developer Jim Anthony couldn't be reached for comment Thursday.

Lavender said The Cliffs had agreed to provide a minimum bridge clearance of 3.5 feet above the full-bank level of the river, a buffer of at least 25 feet from the top of the river bank and 13,000 feet of canopy vegetation along the shoreline.

The developer also has proposed to improve 1,100 feet of the river and 277 feet of a tributary, he said. Only three-quarters of an acre of land along the river or a tributary is actually directly impacted by the project, he said.
