

Environmentalists continue fight

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A coalition of environmental groups will appeal the Cliffs at Mountain Park win before the state Department of Health and Environmental Control's board to an administrative law judge, Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said.

Wyche called the ruling an unprecedented intrusion on a precious resource.

The unanimous ruling allows the Cliffs to continue with plans for a championship golf course along the banks of the North Saluda River.

Greenville developer Paul C. Aughtry III, the DHEC board chairman, said environmentalist arguments that the North Saluda is a navigable stream and that its trout fishery should be protected were at odds with reality. He said the stream is too impaired by sand bars and downed trees to be navigable.

"The North Saluda is not an unscathed, untouched, pristine river by any stretch," he said. "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."

But Dennis Chamberlain, Sierra Club attorney, said the development will make 2.5 miles of public, navigable waters virtually inaccessible to the public.

"Furthermore, (he) has made 2.5 miles of public waters the center piece of his golf course; or, perhaps a giant water hazard as Mr. Aughtry jokingly suggested," he said.

The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, DHEC and environmental groups say the river is a navigable stream.

"I can assure you that members of UF, Sierra and SOS paddle the stream and have done so in the past 60 days," Chamberlain said. "We were even joined recently by someone from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department."

Nick Anastos, husband of Save Our Saluda chairwoman Dianne Anastos said, "The North Saluda is a common man's trout fishery, not some elitist fly



Dianne Anastos/Contributing photographer

NORTH SALUDA FLOTILLA: Members of Save Our Saluda tour the North Saluda in a flotilla through the Cliffs at Mountain Park earlier this year.

fisherman's river."

Aughtry is a past president the Greenville Mountain Bridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited. Mountain Bridge has been part of the coalition challenging the Cliffs plan.

Don Nickell, a Cliffs vice president who defended the plan along with attorney Tommy Lavender before the DHEC board, had no comment on the ruling. However, during the hearing he said developer Jim Anthony had gone out of his way to satisfy critics.

Coastal environmental attorney Jimmy Chandler and Wyche, who is also an attorney, argued the state must move to protect the North Saluda because it is guaranteed that protection under the state Constitution and by statute as a navigable stream. They also argued that, by law, alternative sites must be ruled out before intruding on navigable waters.

They also said nowhere in the region has any golf course developer impinged on a trout stream of the North Saluda's size with 16 bridges and nine ball playovers that the current plan envisions.

Aughtry and other members of the DHEC board consulted with their attorney in executive session before the vote.

After the vote, Chamberlain said, "Of course I'm disappointed in the board's ruling, but it's even more troubling that the developer and DHEC are missing a golden opportunity to help create one of the greatest fresh water watersheds and fisheries on the East Coast. The South Saluda, Middle Saluda and North Saluda all have most of their headwaters in lands protected by the Greenville Water System conservation easement or Jones Gap State Park. The GWS, the City of Greenville, the developer and conservation groups could really create an entire watershed that would draw folks from all over the country to live, swim, fish, paddle... The possibilities are endless."

Nickell emphasized that the 16 bridges over the river were needed as the Cliffs is promoting the Gary Player designed course as a walking one; part of developer Anthony's wellness emphasis.

"A golf course with 25 river crossings along the North Saluda River will essentially take away these public waters for safe public recreation only to benefit the private use of a few," Save Our Saluda said in a statement.

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