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## DHEC board's decision for golf course was right

*By Bo Aughtry*

The July 10 decision by the board of directors of the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control to uphold the DHEC staff's recommendation to permit the proposed Cliffs golf course along the North Saluda River has, as it should have, received much attention from our Upstate community. There are numerous opponents of this development.

In that the staff recommendation of approval was unanimously affirmed by the agency directors, the public perception may be that this board is a "rubber stamp" of staff. Be assured that this is not the case. We take every matter brought before us very seriously and often reverse staff's recommendation in our board decisions.

My personal relationships to this matter are more than my agency role. First, I am a resident of the Upstate and most interested in it as well as all of our state's environmental and economic well-being. Secondly, I am a supporter of three of the environmental/conservation organizations that appealed this permit's approval. Additionally, I am a real estate developer.

Critics will understandably say this creates an inherent conflict in my view of this application and other similar developer requests. Conversely, I believe my vocation gives me a better understanding than I would have otherwise, both of this application and others like it. Frankly, I find myself very scrutinous and critical of developers' plans as they relate to environmental sensitivity -- again, I believe that my understanding of some of these issues is enhanced by my career as a developer.

In this particular case, given my role at DHEC and the polarity of this permit, I took the time to visit this proposed Cliffs development location and observe the river as it now exists. For those of you who may be critical of the agency's recommendation or the board's decision, I strongly encourage you to visit and view it in its current state.

Terming this section of the river a "trout stream" is a misnomer, at least in its current state. Parts of it do serve as a "put and take" DNR river, albeit downstream from the proposed golf course. The stream, its bed and its banks have been significantly degraded by long-term farming along its course, in some cases, literally up to the river's edge. Numerous silt/sediment bars exist, and the stream is strewn with trees which have fallen due to bank erosion, making it currently impassable.

Like the golf course which is proposed, these agricultural uses input fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides into the river. While the golf course is not all that some wish, it is designed to limit infiltration. Moreover, in the case of a significant storm event, a sodded golf course most certainly seems less intrusive and damaging to the ecology of the stream bed than a plowed field, or even one lying fallow.

With all of the above said, I have great respect and admiration for Brad Wyche and all of the work he has done with Upstate Forever. I also admire and appreciate that which his father has done in preserving the northern part of our county as well as protecting much of our downtown. These are not self-serving efforts; they are heartfelt, strong beliefs for which both of these men have made great sacrifice.

And I believe in his presentation to our board that Brad made a valid argument related to alternative

locations for the golf course in that only two others within this 5,000-acre tract were examined. Nonetheless, experience tells me that in a heavily wooded, steep gradient site such as the subject, the already cleared bottomland presents the most logical option, thereby minimizing deforestation and land disturbance due to otherwise necessary grade changes.

It is important for the public to understand that our agency's role in this case only relates to water quality, and our decision was based on that criterion. Regardless, as individual good citizens, we have opinions outside of our DHEC role. In this regard, even though this is a "walking course," I do believe that a further layout examination by the developer with the objective of further reducing stream bridge crossings is very worthwhile -- one more effort of many already made by this company. This component seems to be a hot button with some of the opposition and, I believe, will go a long way toward public acceptance, at least as much as is possible.

All of us realize that a matter of this magnitude has valid opposition as well as equally valid support. It is human nature to resist change when one is potentially being affected; however, balance is important. The end result of change, even when there is just opposition, can be very positive -- look no further than the removal of the Camperdown Bridge in downtown Greenville.

At the end of the day, I agree with John Frampton of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, in stating my belief that the work to be done on this river for this development will enhance it.

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