

Cliffs can build great golf course and protect North Saluda River

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By Brad Wyche

Is there a way to build a 150-acre championship golf course on a 5,000-acre tract of land without harming a beautiful and popular river and without subjecting users of the river to the hazards of whizzing golf balls?

The answer is yes. And that's why the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) and its board were wrong to approve the Cliffs' golf course at its massive Mountain Park development in northern Greenville County.

The Cliffs proposes to build the course on both sides of the North Saluda River for a length of over two miles with a mind-boggling number of bridges (16) and "playovers" (9) across the river. But the DHEC rules are very clear: Before such a project can proceed, the Cliffs has to analyze all feasible alternatives and show that there's no other alternative with less environmental impact. They didn't even come close to complying with this requirement. Their "analysis" of feasible alternatives consisted of a cursory, one-page description of only two other sites on the entire 5,000-acre property. To make matters worse, the "analysis" was submitted two months after the permit application had been filed.

No one is saying that the Cliffs shouldn't have a wonderful golf course at its development. Our point is that it can — and should — be built at a different location.

In his July 19 op-ed in this paper, DHEC Board Chairman and Greenville

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resident Bo Aughtry expressed his views about the Cliffs' highly controversial project. I appreciate Bo's service as board chairman and all the great things he has done for our community. But obviously we don't see eye to eye on this case.

Bo's view is essentially that the river has been so damaged by previous farming operations that building a golf course along it will not hurt — in fact, he thinks it will "enhance" it. His assessment apparently is based on a visit he recently made to the Mountain Park development in order to "observe the river as it now exists."

He attributes every problem he saw to farmers, yet he overlooks the fact that farming operations have ceased and that for well over a year, the Cliffs' contractors have been busily working at the site, cutting down trees,

grading the land, putting in roads and building structures. These activities have already caused significant damage to the North Saluda and its tributaries.

Also, a "before and after" analysis of aerial photographs is instructive. The proposed golf course would stretch along both sides of the North Saluda River for about 2½ miles, amounting to 26,400 linear feet (both sides of the river). Prior to the Cliffs' acquisition of the property, 19,800 linear feet of the river had a buffer of trees that exceeded 50 feet in width. The Cliffs' proposed design would reduce this to 4,300 feet — a loss of 78 percent. Nothing is more important to the well-being of a river than a wide buffer of healthy trees — many experts recommend buffers of at least 100 feet in width.

In short, the Cliffs' proposed design of 16 bridges, 9 playovers, and reduced buffers, combined with the day-to-day operation and maintenance of the golf course, will have direct adverse impacts on the North Saluda, all of which could be avoided by building the course at a different location.

I also disagree with Bo on a couple of other important issues. He says that the North Saluda shouldn't be called a trout stream, yet the fact is that the state Department of Natural Resources stocks the river with trout and many people in the area enjoy fishing it. As one of our members recently said, "It's the average Joe's trout stream." Bo claims that the river isn't naviga-

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ble, yet kayakers and canoeists have taken trips down it even in low flow conditions.

I do agree with Bo that the Cliffs should consider changing its plan. In fact, our expert has come up with a plan that results in a great golf course with no more than three bridges and a substantial buffer of trees on both sides of the river. That could be a win-win solution for everyone — and the river.

The North Saluda River doesn't belong to the Cliffs or to Jim Anthony or to Gary Player. It belongs to all of us. It shouldn't be turned into a giant water hazard for a golf course, and people fishing and paddling it shouldn't have to worry about getting whacked in the head by a golf ball. Rather, the river should be treated with the highest degree of care, attention and respect, and all doubts should be resolved in favor of its protection and restoration.