

If They Break It, They Own It.

Who will be held accountable for the environmental damage caused by the Bluff Point PUD?

The storm swirling around the Bluff Point PUD brings to mind a basic principle that has come to be known as the Pottery Barn rule. "If you break it, you own it." I hope the members of the Northumberland County Board of Supervisors keep this thought in mind as they chew over the pros and cons of granting a special exception permit to Bluff Point Holdings, LLC.

In spite of a public commitment by the developer of the Bluff Point PUD to put "heavy emphasis on environmental protection," several respected, independent environmental organizations, including the Northumberland Association for Progressive Stewardship, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and Wetlands Watch have highlighted significant environmental problems associated with this development. These problems are real, substantial, and expensive to manage. Solutions are limited--and ultimately imperfect.

As I wrote a year or so ago (see "No Such Thing as a Free Lunch," www.groundwatervirginia.org), "We may not know how much environmental damage the Bluff Point PUD will cause until it is too late." Because the site of the Bluff Point PUD abounds in environmentally-sensitive elements, including wetlands, high water table, shrink-swell soils, tidal shorelines and channels, and flood zones, serious and lasting damage from development is a real threat.

We should not presume that just because all regulatory permits have been secured for Bluff Point that environmental injury has been averted. The environmental regulatory process places great faith on breaking the environment of a locality into little pieces and analyzing them individually, in isolation from one another. But the environment is a complex system of living and non-living elements, an interconnected and interworking totality. It cannot be reduced simply to the sum of its parts and is not amenable to this kind of piece-by-piece analysis. Environmental degradation is collective and cumulative, not disconnected and separate.

Consequently, it makes no sense to believe that an assortment of individual environmental permits approved by a mixed bag of governmental agencies working independently is at all sufficient to protect the environment--and the occupants--of Bluff Point from harm. There has been no comprehensive environmental evaluation of the Bluff Point project--not by the developer, not by regulatory agencies, not by the County's consultant

I had hoped that the recent Bluff Point Evaluation Study by AES Consulting Engineers would make an earnest effort to identify the environmental threats and assess their impact. Unfortunately, the consultant's report fell far short of providing the kind of information necessary for calculating the magnitude of environmental damage. We are left sadly in the dark.

If the Northumberland BOS members should decide to approve a special permit for the Bluff Point PUD without the appropriate knowledge of environmental consequences, then they must assume responsibility for any harm that may arise as a result of their decision. They cannot find shelter from their accountability by shifting blame to other parties.

If they break it, they own it.

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