

There's no such thing as a free lunch.

We may not know how much environmental damage the Bluff Point PUD will cause until it is too late.

One of the lessons of the 20th century was that development often comes at a high price. We have to look no farther than the shrunken oyster and crab harvests of the Chesapeake Bay, the barren mountaintops of the West Virginia highlands, and the traffic-choked highways of Northern Virginia. It was the late Al Smith, mayor of New York City, who famously quipped, "There's no such thing as a free lunch."

Right here on our own little patch of the planet, citizens and public officials alike are wrestling with the complex issues of a plan to develop nearly 900 acres of the land surrounding Barnes Creek and including Bluff Point, Northumberland County, Virginia. The construction and operation of this planned community will involve numerous activities that will significantly alter the character of the landscape of the Middle Chesapeake Bay. These include (among many others): land clearing, road construction, wastewater discharge, wetlands draining and filling, stream channel dredging and spoils disposal, shoreline stabilization by hard structures, construction [homes, auxiliary buildings, etc.] in a flood hazard zone, and groundwater withdrawals.

The problem with this project, as I see it, is that all of these development activities will be inflicted on some very environmentally-sensitive land. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a piece of land more unsuitable for large-scale development. During a recent examination of the site, I identified the following features: low-lying and near-level topography; poorly drained, hydric soils; high water table, coastal and forested wetlands; undeveloped shorelines; flood hazard areas; tidal waters (brackish); terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitats; and deep artesian aquifers. It doesn't take a professional landscape architect to understand why the site has so far remained largely undeveloped.

Experience and a little common sense tells us what the adverse effects of the Bluff Point development will be. They include: increased impervious surface and runoff, degraded surface water quality, altered shoreline dynamics (erosion and sedimentation), increased flood damage costs, lost or damaged wildlife habitats, and threats to local groundwater supplies. What we don't know at this early date is how severe these consequences of development will be. That is to say, we need answers to the question: How bad will the environmental damage be? Only with these answers in hand can we decide if the Bluff Point development is worth the cost.

Several factors currently hinder our ability to obtain satisfactory answers to the questions. First, the plans for many of the engineering activities have not yet been finalized. As far as I can ascertain, engineering feasibility and environmental impact studies have not been completed. Consequently, it is not possible to predict at this time, say, the precise impact of channel dredging on aquatic habitats, wastewater discharges on surface water quality, or groundwater withdrawals on artesian water levels. Second, the regulatory authority for the development activities is scattered across numerous County and State agencies. Northumberland County is responsible for reviewing the site plan and approving the request for a special exceptions permit, while the Virginia Departments of Health, Marine Resources, and Environmental Quality carry responsibility for evaluating and endorsing other key parts of the development plan. No single public or private entity is looking carefully at the entire project and assessing its environmental impact.

Sooner or later the Northumberland County Board of Supervisors must act on the request for a special exceptions permit for the Bluff Point development, which will give the go ahead to begin construction at the site. (The project clearly fails to meet the standards of the Conservation District C1 in the County zoning code.) Only later will final plans for shoreline stabilization, dredging, wastewater treatment, groundwater withdrawal, and the like be rigorously evaluated for their environmental impact.

by state regulatory agencies. Then, if serious environment harm is uncovered, it may be too late or too costly to remedy it. Plainly, the trouble with postmortems is their timing.

To his credit, the developer seems committed to "best practices management" in order to protect the environment. He has supported several recommendations to minimize environmental impacts and mitigate the damage. Unfortunately, because of critical flaws in the regulatory process, we may have no way of knowing the outcome of his promises until it is too late. As Ronald Reagan, once cautioned, "Trust but verify."

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