



# Times-News

## Clean Water Is Not A Luxury

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David Weintraub  
ECO NOTES



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Last month, the state legislature sponsored a Regulatory Reform Commission “listening tour” that toured the state. Our town was notable in that we had the highest attendance and the greatest number of people requesting to speak. But just like the rest of the state, Henderson County sent the same message to the commission. Nearly 2/3 of all the speakers made it clear that our environmental rules must be protected if we were going to protect our natural resources, encourage tourism and stimulate the economy.

When the commission returned to Raleigh, they digested what they had heard and determined that they didn't really want to hear from us all that much anyway. As a result, the state legislature's final budget slashes funding for the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the divisions that protect water and air quality, prevents the agency from enforcing the rules at a level any higher than federal guidelines and substantially cuts programs that protect parks, natural heritage, land acquisition for conservation and much more. In the end, the only thing the commission was interested in listening to was themselves.

The result of these budget cuts will mean that the Division of Water Quality (DWQ) which only has one agent for seven counties today will now be virtually non-existent once the cuts go through. The one bright spot, is that we've been able to take comfort in the fact that the county has its own erosion and sedimentation ordinance and we are blessed with a highly qualified Erosion Control Officer who does an excellent job monitoring erosion and stormwater issues, educating landowners on best management practices and enforces the rules when landowners fail to comply. Tim Fox's work was so good that the county won a statewide award several months ago as a model program. So to reward this work, county commissioners have cut his position to part-time.

If one wondered what life was like before we monitored and enforced water quality issues, I have two words for you: Seven Falls. This development has been the poster child for the “anything goes” days when erosion and sediment issues were handled by the state, which means they mostly weren't. The result? Massive stream bank destruction, sediment pond overflows and damaged slopes that will cost the county millions of dollars to repair.

Our economy is tied to our natural heritage. Summer camps bring in \$110 million per year in revenue, tourism brings in another \$200 million, and more from agriculture. Many of these folks come kayaking on the Green River, fly-fishing on the Mills, and come to our farmstands to buy fresh produce and meat that they can't find back east. Without clean, protected water, that all goes away.

Fortunately our commissioners had the good sense to adopt rules to control runaway development, sedimentation, and stormwater several years ago. These rules have been wildly popular with the public because they understand that our community's future is tied to how to handle our natural resources. Since the General Assembly is cutting back on DENR staff and the county is likely to limit the erosion program's effectiveness by cutting Fox's time dedicated toward water quality protection, it will be taking food out of our mouths.

Wilma Dykeman, who wrote in her famous book, *The French Broad*, 50 years ago, “dwellers of the French Broad country are learning an ancient lesson in all their natural resources: it is easy to destroy overnight treasures that cannot be replaced in a generation, easy to destroy in a generation that which cannot be restored in centuries.”

When astronauts look for signs of life on other planets, they look for water. When scientists look for intelligent life on our planet, they look for the wise use and wise protection of our water resources. Let's learn from the past by being more proactive in the future, rather than selling our natural resources short. Water quality should never be a bargaining chip.

*David Weintraub is Executive Director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, which is dedicated to protecting the mountain region's natural heritage. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or online at [www.eco-wnc.org](http://www.eco-wnc.org).*