

Finding our environmental voice

When my child began turning random noises into communication, his first words (beyond mama, dada, baba) were duck, bear, and cat. He loved the ducks he saw at the park everyday, the bears at the WNC Nature Center and his three cats. For him, the world that was most important was the living things he was surrounded by.

For many of us, the same holds true. Those who have lived in WNC all of their lives, appreciate the grandeur of the mountains, the lush woods, and even the occasional frozen coil of the rat snake. Those who moved here from somewhere else came because the echoes of the mountains prevailed over the hectic frenzy of city life. The backbeat of our soul came not from the honking of horns or the mad dash to climb the next ladder, but by the rhythm and cadence of the natural world.

I've found that the folks who live here are generally down-to-earth, forgiving people. People try to help each other out, don't want to rock the boat and try to go the extra mile to lend a hand. During the last ice storm when the road to home was blocked by fallen pines, it took exactly three minutes for me to hitch a ride to the grocery store and back to get supplies before we could dig ourselves out. My neighbors all have stories of strangers going beyond the call to help out when help was needed.

Help is needed. We all understand that now. We watch in horror as some of the most beautiful green spaces in the county are carved up to make a different kind of green for another out-of-town developer. We've also seen many examples of local builders doing the job right, concerned about the consequences regarding storm water runoff and erosion, because they live here. That's not often the case when mega-developers roll into town. To them Henderson County might as well be Miami, might as well be New York, might as well be anyplace. It's just another land to scar and then move on. I don't blame developers, they're just following the rules we give them. The problem is the rules.

That's why so many of you signed the petition to prevent further large scale development until a land use code was in place. You wanted the rules to be fair and clear before another major land project was launched. You knew that the time for action was now and we could no longer wait for our home to become "South Florida with hills."

I've received hundreds of phone calls, letters and emails from people all over the county who are tired of feeling helpless that our town is turning into Anytown, USA. We are on the brink of having our commissioners pass a Land Development Code (LDC). It is a courageous move, but it's not enough if it ultimately doesn't provide real protections.

My son's favorite television show is Bob the Builder. As a dad, I end up watching it with him from time to time. In a recent episode Bob is beginning work on houses in Sunflower Valley using local materials. Spud, the talking scarecrow, wonders why Bob is building in the valley when there's plenty of beautiful mountains around that would give new homeowners spectacular views. Bob patiently explains that clearing land on mountains can cause serious problems like

massive erosion, runoff that kills stream life, and mudslides. He tells Spud that conscientious builders don't take those kinds of chances.

Jonah asks, "Daddy why are people trying to build big houses on our mountains?" And I tell him that the only way to protect our beautiful mountains is to make sure our government creates some balance between a world where "anything goes" and rules that protect us and the critters around us.

We elect government officials to represent the will of this community, to protect the health, welfare and safety of all the citizenry. They insure that whether we have conscientious builders or not, that government will create rules of the game so that our good nature, our sense of community and our natural treasures will not be overwhelmed by shortsightedness.

We need teeth in the LDC to insure that our new zoning areas provide not only quantitative protections in terms of density restrictions, but also qualitative protections that protect against clear cutting of hardwood forests and other sensitive areas. We need regulations that require major subdivisions to *file and follow* impact statements concerning environmental protection, and infrastructure impacts on schools and water. We need regulations to insure that all large subdivisions hook up to city water and sewer, paid for by developers not taxpayers. And we need conservation easements that create contiguous greenspaces, not a checkerboard that plays havoc with our environmental treasures. Commissioners have made a bold move by putting steep slopes on the table. But steep slope protections in nearby counties like Buncombe and Jackson START at 35%, not 65%. We need those protections here as well.

Finding our environmental voice does take practice. Most people are inclined to accept and tolerate until things really get out of hand. That time is now. For those who believe that this place is sacred and needs protection to balance growth with regulations that insure the future of our community character and our natural heritage, here are a few steps that you can take today:

- Contact your commissioners and tell them we want steep slope and floodplain protections and impact statements by all major developers. They can be reached at: William Moyer: wmoyer@hendersoncountync.org, Charlie Messer: cmesser@hendersoncountync.org, Larry Young: lyoung@hendersoncountync.org, Mark Williams: mwilliams@hendersoncountync.org, Chuck McGrady: mcgrady@hendersoncountync.org
- Join ECO at our Annual Meeting on October 27 which will double as a town hall to discuss how our community can be more pro-active to balance growth and natural resource protection. Make reservations at 692-0385.
- Sign up for ECO's free ECO Alert Email Service so you can stay abreast on the latest happenings and how you can get involved (email us at eco@eco-wnc.org)
- Attend public hearings, stay informed on land development issues and express your voice at every opportunity.

My son learned from Bob the Builder that protecting our environment makes sense. Now is the time to find our voice and demand that our elected officials respect the richness of our community so that our children and our children's children have a legacy left to enjoy, not to mention the bears, groundhogs and rat snakes.

Editor's Note: ECO Notes is provided by the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a nonprofit organization dedicated to clean air, clean water, recreation, and the conservation and preservation of the natural heritage and resources of the mountain region. ECO can be reached at (828) 692-0385 or on-line at www.eco-wnc.org.