

Sad Day for Sevier County

Submitted by afriqueart on Thu, 2007/04/12 - 10:54am.

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By James J. Wilson

The Cove Mtn. project (High Bridge PUD) was approved by the Sevier County Planning Commission (PC) last night by a 7 to 4 vote.

There were many questions about the legality of the documents the developer (Kenneth Whaley, also a county commissioner) submitted.

Specifically, the developer presented a 1971 deed that just turned up yesterday that, they say gives them the 50 foot Right of Way (ROW) necessary to access their project.

You may recall that the PC voted to deny this same permit last month because of just that ROW question.

There was an overflow crowd waving signs and being very vocal, as you might imagine. Both commissioners from the district that this PUD is forced upon were pleading with their fellow commissioners to defer the vote until such time that the legality of the documentation could be verified.

Remember that this same commissioner, Kenneth Whaley and his partners at Southern Design are the same ones whose last PUD went belly up and has left scars across Webb Mountain that is causing severe erosion of a pristine waterway even today.

The commissioners had a motion (and second) on the table with a recommendation for approval from the County Planer, Jeff Owenby, before they accepted any public comments.

Five people spoke against the project and raised many questions.

The County Planner did not choose to amend his recommendation and it was hastily passed.

(more after the break)

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The fact that the speakers pointed out that the development did not meet even the few PUD requirements that are on the books did not seem to matter.

The PC even took the rare step of overruling the County Road Supervisor. He had testified by sworn affidavit that the road in question leading to the development was not a county road and was private property.

The current landowners of the ROW also spoke and reported that there was no existing Right of Way to access the development property and they knew nothing about this deed. The commissioner from that district, Ben Claybo lives on the road in question and has lived there all his life.

He could find no one in the neighborhood that knew about any existing ROW. Mr. Wear himself (as in Wear's Valley) was present last night and also testified that there was no existing ROW to the property and never had been.

The current owners and developers admitted last night that they had a title search done when the property was purchased but when questioned further, could not explain how this important document failed to show up in a legal title search but suddenly showed up at the eleventh hour when it became the key factor in the denial of the PUD.

The outcome of the vote allowing the project to proceed, of course was disturbing to the overflow crowd.

The frustration with public officials that repeatedly demonstrate a complete disregard of conflict of interest, published PUD and ethics guidelines and ignore the wishes of their constituents is by far the more serious of our grievances.

The entire process by which this PUD was approved last night was suspect. Perhaps the only good thing was that there were many people that were attending a public meeting for the first time and they got to witness the horrors and shortcomings of the good-ole-boy network in action and were quite vocal about what they saw.

Remember that the huge road cuts necessary in this PUD will not only be highly visible from all over our county but will also define the viewshed of the Scenic Foothills Parkway, the last unfinished "Scenic" Parkway in the United States.

The "Scenic" part is a moot point now. This highly visible eyesore is sandwiched between the GSM National Park and the Scenic Foothills Parkway and will be visible from both. We are chipping away at our mountain heritage and one day our children will ask: who allowed and oversaw this desecration of our mountains? And we will point our fingers at you.

Sevier County (and you) just lost the highest mountain outside the GSMNP to high density development and it was sad to witness the method by which it happened.

The sun is just now rising over Cove Mountain as I write these words. If you hurry, you can still get a picture of it's splendor to show your children what these mountains used to look like before the heavy earth moving equipment moved in.

It is indeed a sad day for Sevier County!