

YOUR LAUREL VALLEY NEIGHBORS COULD USE A HELPING HAND

by Debbie Louis for the Laurel Valley Watch

January 9, 2006

The Laurel Valley is in the northeastern corner of Madison County, stretching west from approximately the Yancey County line to Puncheon Fork Road (and the Puncheon Fork), which intersects with Laurel Valley Road where it meets Rte. 23 a hop, skip and jump from Exit 3 of I-26. Valley farmers raise cattle, goats, mules, horses (including miniatures), and Christmas trees, log the woodlands sustainably, and most households garden organically to meet their own families' needs. Its woodland slopes and ridges are home to wild turkeys, deer, bear, and an occasional bobcat. Its springs and streams create Big Laurel Creek, which continues westward across the County, slightly south of the Appalachian Trail, joining Shelton Laurel just east of Hot Springs, to become the Laurel River which turns south and empties into the French Broad. As such, we feed a water system which also hosts a thriving trout fishing industry and maintains the delicate ecological balance necessary to its continuation. But above all, for those who live here, it is a beautiful, healthful, and peaceful place.

For the past 4-5 years Wolf Laurel Resort, already occupying some 3,000 acres at the intersection of Madison, Yancey, and Unicoi (TN) Counties, has been expanding, closely linked to substantial development right next to it – like “The Lodge” restaurant and luxury vacation log houses jammed together on a ridgetop that has been clearcut for the purpose, and an 800-acre subdivision of luxury (second) homes that spans Madison & Yancy Counties, all of which seem to have the same owners/investors. More recently their activity has moved out well beyond the Resort – the same people under a number of different corporate names and holding companies have been buying up 100+ acre tracts here and there through the Laurel Valley, including the 200 acres surrounding the I-26 entrance/exit ramps, a substantial proportion of which is comprised of wetlands, where an Exxon station is already under construction.

Meanwhile, there have been plans in the works for some time to put in a private airport up there for the convenience of resort/vacation home customers, but they have only recently started actual site work for it, which is already having a disastrous effect on immediately adjacent farms (sludge-flooding for starters). When residents began looking into how this could be permitted, they discovered 1) that some zoning changes (CHANGES, mind you, not variances!) had already been accomplished, and that others are in various stages of approval re the “scattersite” tracts they have been buying up, and 2) that some of the airport site work appears to have already violated some of the conditions of the approvals in hand. More alarming, the developers have been overheard in several instances referring to the project as a “jetport”!

This, and Sentinel coverage of the developers' plans, prompted a number of residents to attend the November Madison County Planning Board meeting to get answers to their questions, register their concerns, and express their opposition to any further action (policy or construction-wise) until these issues could be aired and satisfied. The Planning Board was apparently (along with the developers' representatives) taken completely by surprise, was unable to answer even the most fundamental questions, and tabled the vote on the zoning change that was on the agenda until their January 23 meeting.

Some of the residents who attended the Planning Board meeting then called a community meeting to share what they had (or rather, hadn't) learned, get a broader sense of how residents feel about this, and discuss options and preferences regarding any further activity. Those involved on the developer side were invited to help clarify their plans and listen to residents' questions and concerns. The main property owner didn't show up, but some of his relatives, his contractor/partner, and his publicist did. About 60 neighbors attended, whose concerns might be summarized as follows:

1. This area is an officially-designated watershed for the town of Mars Hill and surrounding areas. The proposed level of development doesn't seem compatible with maintaining the natural water quality the region has enjoyed since the first settlers, and on which both our own health and livelihoods, and our attractiveness to vacationers, depend.
2. Erosion from major de-forestation of steep mountainsides and questionable level of grading re airport can also be disastrous for the area and have already damaged some adjacent properties.
3. We are already beginning to see pollution of healthy (up to now) streams and springs from silt, nitrates, fertilizers and other chemical runoff from previous development.
4. No straight answers (from either the developers or the County) about density, how wastewater and sewage will be managed, how wetlands will be preserved, how access to some of the “landlocked” tracts will be accomplished, and what the traffic impact will be along Laurel Valley and Watershed Roads.
5. This kind of development will inflate everybody's property values resulting in tax increases few families already living here, many for generations, can afford.
6. Lack of communication (by both developers and County) with local residents about intentions, plus evasiveness and misinformation when asked direct questions, have been flagrant and disturbing.

7. Direct threat to the lifestyle and quality of life which brought/ keeps most of us here—a rural, agricultural setting, slow pace, peace and quiet, healthy soil, water and air, neighbors who care about and look after the environment and each other.

When asked about specific items as reported in the newspaper, the developers' representatives consistently responded that the reporter got it wrong, it just wasn't correct information. They insisted they HAD no firm plans for any of the tracts, they have the interests of the whole community at heart, they are publishing a "community" newspaper (the community, we finally figured out, being Wolf Laurel Resort) in order to keep everyone apprised of what they're doing—conveniently placed in locations where no residents go. Wetlands? Well the state doesn't LET you build on those, so not to worry! (Like we haven't all seen these regulations ignored in the past!)

Overall, every time someone raised an uncomfortable question he or she was accused of being a "No growth" advocate not living in the "real world." Time and again residents said they weren't adverse to "development" as long as it's consistent with the overall health, character, and environmental quality of the community, and that we've always welcomed new neighbors. Time and again the response to that was "Well, change is going to happen and there's nothing you can do about it!" Needless to say, community residents in attendance were not at all satisfied with these responses, and called another community meeting for the following week, this time at a local church. Hot Springs environmental attorney Gary Davis was invited to help us sort out our options and let us know what the legal ramifications of different approaches might be.

At that meeting we decided to retain Mr. Davis' services to help present our concerns at the Planning Board meeting on Jan. 23, and we decided to incorporate as a nonprofit community organization so we could be more identifiable in dealing with the County and development personnel. We obtained pledges of financial support for the effort, decided to meet weekly at our district community center, and named the group the Laurel Valley Watch. The next meeting, last Tuesday (Jan. 3) was larger, as a number of neighbors had been away for the holidays the week before. We collected the initial donations, which are being channelled through a local land trust with "501(c)3" status so they are tax deductible, voted in some additional Board members, and assembled committees to coordinate research, publicity, fundraising, and reaching out to environmental and community groups throughout the area who might support our effort.

Why bother? Previous attempts to promote development consistent with community and environmental concerns have been silenced and ignored (Bend-of-Ivy, Spring Creek, Blanhasset Island and others). However, especially with a broad base of support, we think that the Laurel Valley Watch has a good chance of success and can have far-reaching impact when successful, due to:

1. The numbers of residents involved, the size of the affected area, and the range of regulatory issues in question.
2. Diversity of residents—broad spectrum of occupations, personal networks, ages, educational levels, household configurations, expertise.
3. High level of organization, leadership, and sustainability, plus a realistic sense of what's going to be needed/possible.
4. High level of sympathy/support from other communities, many of which have been frustrated in their own efforts to stem exploitative, inadequately planned and regulated local development.
5. When successful, we will have developed a strategic model for other communities facing these issues, and a region-wide support network adequate to the task.

We invite your support at the January 23 Planning Board meeting at the Madison County Courthouse (7pm), and in appealing to our County Commissioners to fulfill both the letter and intent of our Land Use ordinances to protect and preserve our most valuable assets – our mountain terrain and the wildlife, families and livelihoods it has nourished for so many generations. We also welcome your financial support so that we might sustain this effort to positive conclusion. Checks may be made out to the Homestead Community Land Trust (with "for Laurel Valley Watch" on the memo line) and sent to Secretary/Treasurer Judy Womble, 1826 Watershed Road, Mars Hill, NC 28754. Donors will receive a receipt with the related tax information on it. For more information reach Teresa Hammack: 828-689-2975 (teresa.hammack@marshillretire.com).

Whatever happens, and however far we get, many thanks for your ear and your good wishes!