

'Stream buffers are our first and last defense...'

Sept. 10, 06

Dear editor,

Thank you for your article of Aug. 28 which exposed the disregard for local and state stream buffer ordinances that seems pervasive among riverfront property owners in Bartow and Floyd counties.

All river and stream front property owners should take note: these laws prohibit the removal of vegetation within 50 feet of streams and rivers in Bartow County. No structures may be placed within 75 feet of streams or rivers. Failure to abide by these laws can result in significant monetary penalties.

Stream buffers are our first and last defense for keeping our rivers clean. They filter out pollutants, slow floodwaters, and trap sediments that help build and stabilize stream banks. Streamside trees and vegetation provide habitat for wildlife both in the stream and on the land, and by keeping our river banks natural, we preserve the beauty of the river for boaters, fishermen and other river users and protect the integrity of historic sites-of which there are dozens on the Etowah.

Stream buffers also help prevent conflicts between the river and river front property owners--a serious issue in the Waterford subdivision where bank erosion is severe due to the operation of Allatoona Dam. Even without the Dam, the Etowah will change course over time, eroding banks in some places and building them in others. When homes are placed near the river, their owners face the serious possibility of losing land, and even their homes, as the river cuts its ever-changing path. Efforts to prevent this bank erosion can cost property owners hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Unfortunately, as the photographs you published of the Waterford subdivision's riverfront development suggests, the Etowah is under attack. As the population of the Etowah Valley grows, more pressure will be placed on the river corridor.

Unless citizens and government leaders get serious about enforcing buffer laws and even implementing stronger review processes for development within the Etowah River corridor, this river which serves as the drinking water source for two counties and the premiere recreational and historic resource for the region will be forever compromised.

Atlanta's Chattahoochee River faced similar pressures in the early 1970s. Fortunately, a dedicated group of conservationists-including then Gov. Jimmy Carter, took steps to protect the Chattahoochee River corridor. The Metropolitan River Protection Act was passed in 1972 and key properties along the river were protected, leading to the creation of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area-a series of parks along 40 miles of the river between Buford Dam and Atlanta. Because of these efforts, the tree canopy in Atlanta's river corridor has actually increased despite continued development within the corridor.

In the Etowah's 40 miles between Cartersville and Rome there is much at stake. The river's historic resources, its fishery, and its family boating opportunities are unsurpassed in North Georgia. We should act now to protect this treasure before it is too late.

Municipal and county governments in the Etowah Valley should strictly enforce stream buffer laws and implement additional review processes for proposed developments within the Etowah River corridor. Additionally, they should construct public boat ramps/river access points at Douthit's Ferry Road, Euharlee Road and at US 411, and they should identify and permanently protect riverfront property of historic and natural significance.

Meanwhile the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Georgia's Environmental Protection Division should work with riverfront property owners to develop a comprehensive solution to bank erosion problems below Allatoona Dam.

These steps will protect water quality, preserve the beauty of the river, develop the river as a recreational and historic amenity for all residents of the Etowah Valley and protect private property along the river from ongoing bank erosion problems resulting from the operation of Allatoona Dam.

Failure to take these steps will result in a river corridor that looks along its entire length as it currently does in the Waterford subdivision. That would be a tragedy.

Joe Cook

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