

Bigger Buffers Better

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Published: November 17, 2010
Viewpoints, The Durham News

Earlier this month, the City Council (CC) and Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) approved environmentally protective text amendments to the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO, which regulates development practices in Durham), but not before removing the part that would increase stream and wetland buffers in *rural* and *suburban* areas (from 50 to 100 and 25 to 50 feet, respectively). Though I should be used to this by now, I was once again frustrated to the point of tears. Let me explain why...

In early 2008, Durham's Tuscaloosa-Lakewood neighborhood became the first to successfully obtain a 'Neighborhood Protection Overlay' (from undesirable development practices), including preserving existing trees.

The same year, I introduced to Durham's Interneighborhood Council (INC) a resolution specifying environmental protections which, thanks to several knowledgeable and diplomatic INC members, became the REAP (Resolution for Environmental Amendments and Protections in Durham's UDO). The first section requested increased stream buffers (areas of undisturbed trees/vegetation, 100 feet for perennial streams and 50 feet for intermittent streams). The REAP was endorsed by Durham's Open Space and Trails Committee (DOST), NE Creek Streamwatch, Friends of [Ellerbe Creek](#), Old West neighborhood, Tuscaloosa-Lakewood Neighborhood, and the [Haw River](#), INC and [New Hope Creek](#) Organizations (the latter two in a substantially truncated version).

In late 2008, the Joint City County Planning Committee (JCCPC, consisting of three CC members, three BOCC members, the planning director, city and county managers, and planning commission chairperson) created the EEUDO committee (to recommend Environmental Enhancements to the UDO), comprised of one city councilor, one county commissioner, and citizens from both development and environmental perspectives: Mike Woodard (JCCPC, City Council), Ellen Reckhow (JCCPC, County Commissioner), Frank Thomas (Home Builders Association's Director of Government Relations), Craig Morrison (Residential Developer), Gregg Sandreuter (Non-residential Developer), Dan Jewell (Landscape Architect/Consultant), Wendy Jacobs (Planning Commissioner, Land Use Planner), Pat Carstensen (Interneighborhood Council), Rochelle Araujo (Environmental Affairs Board), Will Wilson (DOST), Charles McEachern (JCCPC Chair Appointee), Kathryn Spann (JCCPC Vice-chair Appointee). This committee met 1.5 hours/month for 6 months to discuss an immense amount of background material supplied by the planning department in the interim.

City council, JCCPC and EEUDO member Mike Woodard described the EEUDO as "a balance of members from environmental groups, development interests, and neighborhoods," and said, "I am pleased we were able to recruit a broad-based group with deep knowledge of land-use issues. I often referred to the committee as an "all-star team," and the amount of quality work it accomplished in a short time was impressive" (*Independent Weekly*, 12Aug2009).

Nonetheless, the EEUDO's recommended stream buffer expansions were removed from consideration this month, because according to Mayor Bill Bell, "'We've got to have a better vetting process than we've had to date... We've got to make sure we get more input into the changes we're proposing" (Herald Sun, 4Nov2010).

Like others, I logically assumed the EEUDO recommendations would be implemented as a matter of course, without necessitating further citizen support. However, despite representation on the EEUDO, development and homebuilders association members objected, seeking and receiving a delay on the buffer expansion matter, primarily because it exceeds state requirements and could affect projects currently under consideration.

I was relieved to find that “both City Council and County Commissioners instructed staff to do further research and outreach into wider riparian buffers [before coming back] with a proposal that meets the interests of both the development and environmental communities” (planning department email to EEUDO members, Nov. 9).

I’m limited by my word count, but for starters:

It is well known that erosion, sedimentation and pollution from industrial and agricultural activities or sewage is reduced by “maintaining forests in riparian zones along watercourses” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).

“While some narrow buffers (1-15 m) removed significant proportions of nitrogen, narrow buffers actually contributed to nitrogen loads in riparian zones in some cases. Wider buffers (>50 m) more consistently removed significant portions of nitrogen entering a riparian zone” (Environmental Protection Agency, 2005).

The average tree intercepts 1,271 gallons of precipitation/year, saving \$523,311 in storm-water retention costs (City of Boulder Colorado News Release, 24Oct2005).

Property values are 7 to 25 percent higher for houses surrounded by trees (McAliney, Mike, *Arguments for Land Conservation*, 1993), and consumers spend ~13 percent more at shops near green landscapes (The Center for Urban Horticulture, 1999).

A 30-inch-diameter (i.e. existing mature) tree removes 70 times more pollution/year than a 3-inch (i.e. replacement sapling) tree does, and ‘just one shady tree can save a homeowner \$80 - \$120 a year in energy costs’ (Gilsdorf, Ethan, *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 April 2006).

I hope Durham citizens will provide elected officials with further input regarding how best to protect our waterways, which I (and the EEUDO apparently) believe includes increases in stream and wetland buffers (to 100 and 50 feet, respectively).

The decision should not only meet 'the interests of both the development and the environmental communities,' but those of unaffiliated citizens (all of whom will be paying the bill to clean up Jordan and Falls lakes) as well.