Cliff's project adapts to river, money issues



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Gary Player and Jim Anthony walk through the new golf course, The Cliffs at Mountain Park, off of State 11.

Mountain Park back on course

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Construction has resumed on the Gary Player-designed golf course at The Cliffs at Mountain Park, the development company's largest residential and commercial project and an important economic engine in northern Greenville County.

The work had been suspended while Jim Anthony, founder of The Cliffs Communities, addressed conservationists' concerns about the course's proximity to the North Saluda River and worked with property owners to raise at least $60 million through a private placement offering to complete amenities in his developments.

Anthony and Player told *The Greenville News* last week now that the money has been raised, and the major environmental concerns dealt with, work on the golf course should be completed by late next summer.

Anthony said steps have been taken to protect the river by acquiring additional land to create more buffers and reducing the number of golf course river crossings "significantly."

"We've done dozens of routings — how can we make this work and answer the concerns of being adjacent to the river, really close to the river," Anthony said. "The real key was acquiring additional land."

> "He's made peace with his neighbors."
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> Golfer, course designer Gary Player on Jim Anthony's efforts at the Cliffs at Mountain Park

"There are all little trials and tribulations," Player said. "But it's turned out a win-win for everybody."

At Mountain Park, three holes are complete and about 70 percent of the rough grading is finished, Anthony said.

The driving range and the clubhouse are being relocated to the same side of the road, one of the par-4 holes has been shortened to

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prevent removal of some trees and treated effluent will be used for irrigation instead of being put back into the river, Anthony and Player said.

They have worked with researchers to determine how to use less fertilizer and less pesticide and take advantage of the natural surroundings, Anthony said.

"Our concept here is to make the fairways harder (firmer), not use as much water, not use as much fertilizer, let people be able to reach par 5s in two," said Player, a professional golf legend who has designed 300 courses around the world.

The new golf-course routing consists of 7,352 yards from the championship tees and 6,249 yards from the blue tees, where a majority of golfers will play, Player said.

Jeff Lawrence, senior designer with Gary Player Design, said the course will be flatter and more conducive to walking. Designers have modified 11 golf holes and cut in half the number of river crossings, he said.

The design, Player said, is being done with a careful eye on maintenance costs, which he said have been rising and threatening golf's economic health.

A report in 2008 by two Clemson University professors and a research associate estimated The Cliffs Communities by 2012 would have a $3 billion impact on the regional economy, based on jobs, income and gross sales.

That estimate was made before the recession fully took hold. Anthony has said turmoil in financial markets forced him to turn to property owners and pursue an alternative financing strategy to steer through the crisis.

The Clemson report estimated The Cliffs economic impact would begin to drop after 2012 due to a falloff in construction and a decline in the impact of overall employment.

The report estimated that The Cliffs Communities would have a $42.2 million tax-revenue impact on South Carolina and North Carolina in 2016, based on constant 2006 dollars.



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Gary Player talks about the new golf course, The Cliffs at Mountain Park.

The revenue would be generated by local option sales, real estate and personal property taxes.

A tentative agreement between conservation groups and The Cliffs Communities called for Anthony to support a fund to pay for watershed restoration after construction and a site for public access to the river for boating and fishing, both sides said.

Anthony and Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, recently said the agreement called for protective barriers along the North Saluda, elimination of some golf cart bridges on the course and limits on use of river water for irrigation.

Mountain Park, announced in 2006, is the largest Cliffs development, a 5,000-acre project with lots for 1,500 homes. The golf course will stretch along the river between State 11 and U.S. 25.

Wyche said Greenville-based Upstate Forever wouldn't continue opposing The Cliffs' plan to dispense wastewater in an area next to the golf course.

Conservations didn't believe the location was a good site for a golf course, but several provisions to which Anthony agreed — such as longer and wider buffers, fewer bridges, minimal channel alteration, and water withdrawal limits — mean that the impact of the course on the North Saluda would be "substantially less" than what it would have been under the original proposal, Wyche said.

The Cliffs originally applied for a permit to discharge wastewater into the Saluda, but later withdrew it.

After the project was proposed, conservationists said they met with Cliffs representatives to voice "serious concerns" and asked them to modify the approach.

Conservation groups said they weren't opposed to the Mountain Park project but were concerned about development activities and practices that threaten the environment, particularly in sensitive areas such as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wanted Anthony to suspend plans for the golf course until the project's impact on the North Saluda and surrounding environment could be determined.

"He's made peace with his neighbors," Player said of Anthony. "We've changed a lot of greens on the water. We've changed a lot of the fairways on the water — things that they've required us to do. He's gone ahead and bought more land (for buffers) to satisfy them. And now we're going to do this golf course."