Re: Central West - one of Chapel's Hill's last remaining unprotected mature forest

As a homeowner on Mt. Bolus and a forest ecologist at UNC, I hope to raise four points on the proposed development of Central West:

1. THE most pressing concern from my perspective is the potential loss of an incredibly valuable asset: one of Chapel Hill's last remaining near old-growth forests. I am of course referring to the area where the bulk of the senior center is currently being planned. This forest is about as close as we get here to old-growth - 100+ year secondary forest possessing several rare plant species, champion trees (possibly the largest Loblolly Pine and some of the tallest Tulip Poplars in Orange County) and bountiful wildlife. Due to its topography, there are waterfalls, glades and at least three distinct vegetation communities. The bulk of the area (that not in the conservation district buffer) is now planned for destruction. This area is a community resource and should be protected. It's loss is preventable and would be a devastating blow to the town, and especially to future generations when spaces like this, so close to the heart of Chapel Hill, will be increasingly rare.

2. If development of a certain number of senior housing units on this site is inevitable, would it not be more sensible to do it in a way that better preserves this invaluable resource? I propose setting aside the bulk of this mature biodiverse forest for posterity. And to fulfill this supposed housing demand, making the two other currently planned senior housing areas along Estes and the new road south of the YMCA more dense - say, four story buildings and not single story sprawling houses. Total senior housing units would remain the same, while the core forest area could remain untouched, save for some walking trails.

3. The benefits to society of an added green space (and specifically, a semi old-growth forest) speak for themselves. So does the need to protect the integrity of the Jordan Lake watershed. Here I present two ecological arguments for maximizing a single tract of forest area vs. fragmented green space like that existing between yards in a sprawling development.

\* A fundamental aspect of conservation biology is the Species Area Relationship. Without going into detail of underlying mechanisms, the application of this rule of ecology states that given a certain total area, more species can be held in a single large tract, than in the combination of several smaller fragmented areas. In the case of Central West, more species of plants, mammals and birds can inhabit a singular preserved space, than in one fragmented under the auspices of interlocking, smaller green spaces.

\* The area currently slated for destruction exists on a ridge, as a peninsula bounded by the conservation district buffer. I am confident an environmental assessment will confirm that even with the buffer, development on the ridge will have an unacceptably detrimental impact upon water quality. But beyond this, destroying this semi old-growth forest will likewise mean the destruction of a rare vegetation community in and of itself - a dry juniper-oak forest possessing some very old trees, gnarled and stunted due to the unique soil conditions on the site. The loss of this rare natural community is preventable.

4. Some have argued against dense/high development because it would ruin their view. This is a valid argument, however one that ultimately stems from an aesthetic preference, and not one based on environmental science nor sustainability. In my opinion, arguing for the integrity of people's viewscape is far less convincing than for the integrity of a near old-growth forest, for biodiversity and for one of the last remaining unprotected mature forests in Chapel Hill. If this means building more densely on MLK and Estes, so be it. The alternative is sprawl, and the potential eradication of mature forest and countless birds and animals.

I hope these points may promote discussion and I welcome comment and critique. Regardless of where we fall on specifics, I know how dear this area is to many of us and I'm moved by the community outcry I've witnessed thus far.

Thank you,

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