

## **Comments by New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee on Site Plan Submitted by Baker Homes for 20 Acre Tract Adjoining Hollow Rock Nature Park**

**January 9, 2020**

Dear Mr. Mayor and Members of the Durham City Council:

The New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the site plan for development of 38 single family homes by Baker Homes on a 20 acre tract immediately adjoining Hollow Rock Nature Park. We appreciate the action of Council in delaying approval of the site plan and related annexation for long enough to give us a chance to offer comments. We understand that site plan review is a largely technical exercise and that the development is being built under existing zoning. Nevertheless, we have often in the past been notified of site plans in the Corridor and have acted rapidly, and we believe constructively, to offer suggestions that have avoided unnecessary impacts on New Hope resources.

As you know, the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee was established in 1992 to advise the four local jurisdictions on the implementation of the New Hope Corridor Plan. Hollow Rock Nature Park was part of the original New Hope vision, and was created after a citizen-led campaign and brought to reality with funds from the localities and the North Carolina Clean Water fund, and private donations of money and of conservation easements. The park serves both as an important part of the New Hope wildlife corridor and as a heavily used recreational resource for residents of Durham and Orange County/Chapel Hill.

The Committee met on January 9 to review the site plan. The meeting was attended by all members of the New Hope Advisory Committee as well as several neighboring property owners. We appreciate the presentation by Mark Bowles and Brad Whitehurst of Baker Homes and their openness to our suggestions.

Our comments are as follows:

(1) Trail connection. Baker Homes had already responded to the suggestion of county staff that there be a single connection to the trail system within Hollow Rock Park, located on the north end the property. This is important so as to avoid creation of damaging "social trails" into the park from individual lots. There is still quite a bit of ambiguity as to exactly how the connection should be made (paved/unpaved, degree of slope, ways to limit erosion in the long run). We suggest that the developer work with the county trails manager develop a specific proposal. In turn, county staff will create a link within the park to the existing trail system.

(2) We appreciate the fact that Baker Homes is providing a vegetated setback of at least 30 feet from the park boundary to their residential lots. However, residential use adjacent to open space has a number of well documented impacts on adjoining open space, including typically unofficial "social trails" cut from individual homes to the park, weed and grass clipping piles, dog usage and nuisance barking, and encroachments such as forts and sheds. Both the County Open Space program staff as well as the Duke Forest Manager confirmed that these are typical and predictable on-going land management issues where individual homes back up to open space. Since the 30 feet buffer is so narrow, it is critically important that it truly function as a buffer, not as an extension of the back yards. To minimize these impacts, we request that the developer install a solid wood fence, at 4-5 feet in height, between the rear property line of the 14 single family lots and the 30 foot buffer. This will help to ensure that the buffer truly functions as a buffer, and that Baker Residential and its future homeowners can be the good future park neighbor that has been pledged.

(3) We suggest that, unless necessary for construction, as much land behind the houses adjoining the Park be left uncleared. This would be in addition to the 30 ft. buffer, though not a formal expansion of it. We believe that any cleared land is likely to be planted in grass by homeowners. Leaving natural vegetation, even small trees and bushes, will likely mean that homeowners will leave the land in its present state.

(4) Native plants. The Committee suggested that several steps be taken to ensure as much native plant material as possible be used to revegetate disturbed parts of the site.

--street trees planted by the developer should be North Carolina natives, with several species used in order to avoid future problems of disease and mass die-off. We suggested that the Durham Urban Forester could offer useful advice on this.

--other vegetation planted by the developer as the entrance or other areas be native NC species.

-- each home buyer should be offered printed material encouraging use of native plants. This should be available from State Agricultural Extension or other homeowners' associations so there would be no cost to the developer.

(5) When homeowners plant lawns, they should be discouraged from use of synthetic pesticides and excess use of fertilizer. Durham Agricultural Extension can offer both pamphlets and personal on-site advice on this.

(6) Lighting. The "dark sky" resource is important to Hollow Rock Park both because of wildlife values and because of the opportunity for astronomy programming. (This has been done several times at another New Hope park, Sandy Creek Park.) Durham has a very progressive lighting ordinance, but we believe the developer can go beyond it at little or no cost. First, we hope that street lighting be done

with short poles, with light directed downward, where it is actually needed. Second, we hope that home buyers will be given guidance as to how to install private exterior lighting that provides illumination only where it is needed, without "leakage" that would disturb neighbors or wildlife.

(7) We encourage the new homeowners' association--controlled by Baker Homes in the first two years--will provide leadership in sustainable practices and education about the park. Many studies have shown that access to parks and trails increase residential property values. We suggest that Baker Homes take advantage of this in marketing the development as "environmentally friendly" and use the association to offer guidance to new residents.

(8) We suggest that residents of the new development, as well as individual neighbors and their existing associations consider creating a formal or informal "Friends of Hollow Rock Park". Such a group has long existed at Sandy Creek Park, and has resulted in thousands of hours of volunteer work to maintain and improve the park and significant financial contributions, as well as "eyes on the park" that have helped alert park managers to issues such as loose dogs, damaged trails and problems with the bathroom. We understand that some steps toward this have already been taken. If it would be considered helpful, the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee would be happy to include by-laws or announcements of events on its website [www.newhopecreek.org](http://www.newhopecreek.org), which has long accommodated not only our documents, but also photographs taken along the New Hope, newspaper articles and other information useful to understanding and appreciating the corridor.

(9) Next steps: The Committee requests that Baker Homes provide a written response to the above suggestions, addressed both to the Committee and to Council, offering specific commitments to what they will do. We realize that this would not involve legally binding proffers, but we think the spirit of cooperation they have demonstrated so far, as well as their reputation as a good citizen of Durham will result in promises they will keep.

Sincerely,

Robert G. Healy

Co-Chair, New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee