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## WE MUST ACT NOW TO PROTECT CATAWBA RIVER

Duke Energy has a crucial role to play in preserving the river

By Vicki Taylor, Charlotte Observer Community Columnist

I heard it again on the radio. A well meaning caller on “Charlotte Talks” referred to the Catawba River as the 13th most polluted in America. This mistake should be corrected. The Catawba is far from being so polluted. The misunderstanding stems from American Rivers’ designation of our river as the 13th most endangered in the nation. What they said was: “Explosive growth along the Catawba River in North and South Carolina threatens to overwhelm the river’s capacity to provide drinking water, assimilate sewage, support wildlife, and serve the recreational needs of Charlotte and growing communities throughout the basin.”

But it is actually more critical to be endangered than polluted because we now have the opportunity to act prudently and before the fact rather than to lament, blame and clean up afterwards.

But will we? Right now lobbyists are getting state legislators to sign petitions to remove buffers from the Catawba River. Buffers are strips of forested land that protect us from dangerous contaminants running directly into our water.

Pressure on our water is mounting. More clean water is needed every day to accommodate our growth. The arithmetic says that in a few years all the water we take out of the Catawba to drink will have gone through someone’s plumbing first. The time is now to upgrade all sewage treatment plants to the highest state possible and to eliminate all discharges that go directly into our lakes.

More insidious threats are the degree and manner of development along the river and lakes. It has gone like most of our region’s growth - with little consideration of long-term effects, no regional planning and failure to preserve unbuilt areas. The concepts of “open space” and transportation planning are conspicuously absent. The usual suspects are at work: too many counties, municipalities and interests all ignoring the cumulative impacts of their decisions. People rarely noticed or cared if critical buffers in our watershed were being destroyed, preventing the natural cleansing of water. No regional cooperation existed to prevent one county from permitting a sewage discharge above another county’s drinking water intake. Foot by foot the shorelines are changing from a natural filtering mechanism rich with wildlife and fish spawning to runways for pollutants.

Political will and authority are scattered but one entity, Duke Energy, does have an overall responsibility to manage the shoreline. They are not responsible for poor planning decisions, but their license to use our water to generate electricity comes with a condition to produce a Shoreline Management Plan that balances the interests of water users. In 1983 they were charged by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to produce a plan that would prevent

“further impairment of the natural resources,” ensure adequate public recreation facilities and protect and enhance scenic and other environmental values. A glance at how the shoreline has actually been “managed” leaves a huge gap between what is required and what is being done.

The Department of the Interior has filed concerns to the FERC regarding a recent Duke proposal for a Crescent Resources marina: “It will contribute to the deterioration and degradation of the ... area’s shoreline and its fish and wildlife habitats. ... (Duke Energy’s Shoreline Management Plan) fails to set forth a comprehensive plan for managing the multiple resources of the project shoreline ... and fails to balance shoreline development with shoreline protection ... and fails to prioritize and protect certain undeveloped areas that have important recreational, scenic and environmental values.”

What has been missing is a collaborative effort by Duke and all the stakeholders in our river basin to make wise shoreline decisions.

A unique opportunity to refocus their attention is on the horizon. Duke’s 50-year license expires in 2008. The relicensing process begins in 2003 and they are required to respond to today’s issues, values and perspectives.

A coalition of stakeholders has formed, including state and federal agencies, city and county officials, homeowners groups, environmental and conservation groups, outdoor sports enthusiasts and Native Americans - all interested in achieving a better balance of uses for our river. We will educate and negotiate to balance perspectives so the river and its lakes remain more than a backyard for subdivisions. Our model is inclusive and non-adversarial, and we are urging Duke to collaborate with us to better coordinate river management among governing authorities, public and private interests.

Duke, with its license obligations and land holdings, is pivotal in determining whether we address our river resources just in time or too late.