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Stream Project Draws Debate

By Leslie Perales
Observer Staff Writer

More than 100 residents packed into Reston Association's headquarters Tuesday night to voice concerns about the ongoing stream restoration project. The project started in February and includes restoration and rebuilding of 14 miles of area streams.

RA staff was asked if independent consultants verified whether the restoration work was needed. Nicki Foremsky, RA's watershed manager, said three natural resource consulting groups, including Wetland Studies and Solutions Inc., which is conducting the work, reviewed the restoration project after it was first proposed in 2000. However, residents said RA should hire another independent consultant to review the project again and decide if it is necessary.

Concerns were also expressed about wildlife and plants near the streams, and RA and Wetland Studies staff was also asked if an ecological study was completed. Mike Rolband, president of Wetland Studies, said Wetland Studies works under a permit through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer that does not require an ecological study.

The permit states that the restoration project "may alter the habitat characteristics of streams and wetlands, favoring certain species at the expense of other species," but the Endangered Species Act must be followed to ensure no endangered species are harmed. Under the USACE regulations, the district engineer overseeing each project must review all permit applications for potential impacts to endangered species or critical habitat. Both the USACE and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality are overseeing the project.

Other meeting attendees said the erosion was natural and RA should allow nature to take its course. Rolband said the erosion was caused by development, which sends much more stormwater runoff than is natural through Reston's streams.

Jerry Volloy, who served as CEO of RA when the project began, said he did not think the restoration project was needed when it was first introduced. However after hiring independent consultants "to make sure we did have real problems within our streams," he was convinced. After that, he guided RA staff in the development of the 2002 stormwater management plan, which identified the streams with erosion problems, he said.

"We had the independent contractors in here, we had the Corps of Engineers involved, we had the department of environmental quality involved, we had Chuck Veatch and we had the Reston Association," Volloy said.

RA President Robin Smyers said the project has been in the works for eight years and

numerous updates have been provided through the Web site, newsletters, publications and local and regional newspapers. "The process is ongoing and all of our meetings are always open to the public," she said.

Smyers also said not all comments about the project have been negative. "There really are a lot of people that are giving positive feedback and are happy about the work being done," Smyers said. "All I can say is that I truly believe that we're doing the right thing and it's going to be a success when it's all said and done.

All of us are concerned about it. It's not just the trees we want to protect, it's the entire holistic environment."

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