

Haw River Assembly's Recommendations for Environmental Protection for Disney's Asteria Storyliving Development

The Haw River Assembly has worked since 1982 to protect and restore the Haw River in North Carolina. For nearly 15 years we've been at the forefront of the effort to persuade Chatham Park Investors (CPI) to do more to protect the Haw River and the environment it flows through as they transform 8000 acres of forest land into a new city-sized development of 60,000 people and 22 million sq. ft of commercial space.

We do not believe CPI has adequate standards in place to preserve enough of the existing forest, to protect more of the land near the river and streams that run through it and to do more than the required minimum to protect water quality. The "North Village " section of Chatham Park, where Disney's Asteria Storyliving project will be built, abuts the NC Lower Haw River State Natural Area. We fear this valuable public land, and the Haw River it adjoins, will be degraded by the removal of the forest nearby, and the introduction of lights, noise and roads.

We challenge Disney to apply the concepts to the Asteria Storyliving community that they have stated in the Walt Disney Company 2030 Environmental Goals: *"Disney is committed to taking meaningful and measurable action to support a healthier planet for future generations as we operate and grow our business"*.

Specific Design Recommendations

1. Do not build a new road above the Haw River that would be at the edge of the 300' Haw River buffer that Chatham Park had agreed to protect. The original plan was that the backyards of houses would abut this buffer, and that the 50' of these individual properties closest to the buffer would remain in a natural forested stage. This new road alignment would create more traffic, light, noise, and runoff pollution near the river.
2. Any trail along the Haw River should be a part of the overall Haw River State Trail Plan, and be a natural surface trail in keeping with conservation goals for the Haw River State Natural Area. A 10 ft wide, paved pedestrian and bicycle greenway, in a 30 ft cleared easement along the Haw and through the Lower Haw River State Natural Area would not be in keeping with the goals for preservation of the wildlife and plants in this sensitive riparian area.
4. Do not allow Bynum Beach Road to be used for anything other than emergency access. There should be no widening or expansion of this road, which is very close to the river and within a flood hazard area.

Better Stormwater Management

Due to the proximity of the streams and the Haw River to this project, we advise you to consider implementing more Green Stormwater Infrastructure practices into the design during the construction phase of this project. Much of the land where Asteria will be built is now forested and will be replaced with hard, impervious surfaces. This means less rain soaks into the ground or evaporates back into the air, and more runs off into nearby streams, eroding their beds and banks, and degrading water quality.

Chatham Park's Stormwater Element includes a point system to encourage some of these Green Stormwater Infrastructure practices and techniques such as rain gardens, bioswales, larger riparian buffers, tree protection, and permeable pavement, among others – that keep stormwater onsite instead of letting it run off. Use swales instead of curb and gutter for all roads, streets and alleys within a 1000 ft of the Haw, and within the “regulatory” and “voluntary” stream buffer areas for all stream crossing road sections. These practices protect groundwater supplies and stream health, and can cost much less over time than managing stormwater with large retention basins. We would encourage Chatham Park to use these green infrastructure tools as *practice* instead of recommendations.

Additionally, the NC Department of Environmental Quality will be revising the Stormwater Design Manual in 2024. These revisions will reflect mandatory updates required by EPA, and will assess revisions to the “design storm” calculations based on current trends in precipitation, driven by climate change. In order to show a commitment to protecting the Haw River and its tributaries within the Asteria project, we advise all stormwater management to be designed to meet the 100 year storm event (the storm that happens once every 100 years) which are now becoming a more common event. We are already experiencing stronger storms in this region that overwhelm stormwater systems built for 10 year storms, the inadequate standard required by Chatham Park. Taking this proactive approach voluntarily will help to restore public trust in the community. Disney's Asteria will be part of.

Greater protection of Riparian Buffers

The area in which Disney will build the Asteria community is rich in biodiversity of sensitive wildlife and rare plants. This section of the Haw River is designated as critical habitat for the endangered Cape Fear Shiner. As Chatham Park and the surrounding area continues to be developed, habitat fragmentation could dramatically reduce the populations of amphibians, birds, mammals, and aquatic life in this fragile ecosystem. In order to prevent the destruction of these wildlife populations, surface water buffer widths and conservation area needs must be based on the scientific analyses by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. The NC Wildlife Resource Commission [“Conservation Recommendations for Priority Terrestrial Wildlife Species and Habitats in North Carolina.”](#) recommends that surface water buffers should be 2500' along the Haw River. Conservation areas need at least a 75 acre core zone with conservation areas connected by at least 150' corridors.

More Tree Coverage

The tree coverage area approved for Chatham Park is significantly less than the requirements of neighboring towns and in the recommendations for Chatham County's new Unified Development Ordinance. As the impacts of climate change continue to worsen, we are already seeing hotter summers, increased flooding, and extended periods of drought. The most cost effective solution to these problems is protecting existing tree canopy. Chatham Park's prior commitment was to preserve 35% of existing trees within 2000 ft. of the Haw River. We recommend that you save more of the existing forest. Tree coverage in designated park areas shouldn't be used as an offset for a larger area. Tree coverage is a most important strategy to offset heat sinks throughout Chatham Park, including Asteria.