Weighing In On Hills Debate

McAllister, a former Baykeeper, says PDD is better option than another subdivision

BY AMANDA BERNOCO
At least one local water quality expert thinks the construction of a proposed luxury golf resort in East Quogue, as opposed to the creation of a residential subdivision at the site, would have less of an impact on already polluted groundwater in the hamlet.

Kevin McAllister, founder of Defend H2O and a former Peconic Baykeeper, said this week that the science included in the draft environmental impact statement, or DEIS, filed with Southampton Town by the Discovery Land Company of Arizona—the developer behind the proposed golf resort known as “The Hills at Southampton”—adds up, particularly the section about the project’s impact on nitrogen levels in the groundwater.

He was quick to note, however, that his assessment of the 473-page document should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the application itself, which seeks Town Board approval of a planned development district, or PDD, to permit construction of 118 residential units and an 18-hole golf course centered on 168 acres along Spinney Road. The remaining acreage, nearly 430 acres, would be preserved as open space as part of the proposal.

“I believe their analysis is accurate—that they will have no increase in nitrogen,” Mr. McAllister said on Friday, referring to the developer. “They went through an analysis. It has been used before. It’s not new science.” Specifically, Mr. McAllister pointed to how Discovery Land intends to recycle the groundwater sitting below its property—groundwater that already contains elevated levels of nitrogen, mainly due to fertilizers and antiquated septic systems in the area—to irrigate the golf course, which would also feature lined greens and tee boxes. He said that such measures, already instituted at Sebonack Golf Club in Tuckahoe and Atlantic Golf Club in Bridgehampton, make sense and should
help limit the amount of new nitrogen introduced to the groundwater. Critics of the project have stated that pesticides and fertilizers used on the golf course would contribute additional pollution to the region.

In addition to the course, Discovery Land is seeking permission from the town to build 118 residential units—95 single-family homes, 13 clubhouse cabins and 10 clubhouse condominiums. If approved, the town would be allowing the developer to move forward with a PDD, special zoning that requires Discovery Land to also offer a number of community benefits, such as the installation of advanced septic systems that would be servicing the 118 homes.

To that end, Mr. McAllister also said such a measure should have less of an impact on the environment than traditional cesspools, units that would most likely be installed if Discovery Land opts to develop the land under its current 5-acre zoning.

Mr. McAllister’s analysis of the project rivals the findings of Dr. Christopher Gobler, a marine science professor at Stony Brook Southampton and an East Quogue resident. While he has previously stated that he has no official position on the application, Dr. Gobler did note that any development—whether it is a new subdivision or golf course community would inevitably add more nitrogen to the groundwater. Dr. Gobler explained his stance to the Town Board during the third public hearing on the project on January 10, following his review of the document.

Though he did not attend that hearing, Mr. McAllister said he is pleased that Dr. Gobler is also reviewing it with a close eye. In fact, Dr. Gobler—who did not immediately return a call or email—sat down with the Town Board and Discovery Land representatives prior to the final hearing on the DEIS earlier this month, according to Mark Hissey, a vice president of Discovery Land.

Mr. Hissey said that meeting, the first of most likely many with the East Quogue marine scientist, went well. “I’m very confident we are going to come to agreement,” he said.

“I’m glad Chris is scrutinizing [the DEIS] and paying attention to the details,” Mr. McAllister added.

Mr. McAllister also said that while he agrees with other environmentalists that the best-case scenario would have been to preserve the land, he has come to realize that it is most likely no longer an option, meaning that the best option is to ensure that whatever is eventually built would have the least amount of impact on the environment. Mr. Hissey has made it clear in prior interviews that his company is not willing to sell the land, which is actually made up of at least 175 of smaller properties. “In some form, development is inevitable,” Mr. McAllister said. Last summer, the Town Board made its fourth offer to purchase the land, this time offering $35 million—but it was rejected by Discovery Land. According to town records, the developer spent $17.4 million on 49 lots totaling 290.9 acres in 2013—but does not list any other transactions for land that is now owned by the company. That offer was the first one made with Jay Schneiderman serving as town supervisor; the three prior offers came when Anna Throne-Holst was in that position.

Pointing to the improbability of the land being preserved, Mr. McAllister said it is important to ensure that whatever development is approved has the least impact on the environment. To that end, he said he thinks the PDD, as proposed, would have less of an impact than the as-of-right alternative—making it the better of the two options.

But the “as-of-right” option remains open to vigorous debate, with Discovery Land officials insisting that they can build up to 118 residential units under current five-acre zoning, the most restrictive in the town, while project opponents charge that the figure is actually much lower due to the location of the land and its proximity to the Pine Barrens. The 118 figure, environmentalists have pointed out, fails to factor in the topography of the land, as well as the need to set aside space for the installation of roads and drainage, and other elements of the planning process. Those factors, opponents argue,
should significantly reduce the number of units that the developer is allowed to construct if the Town Board rejects the application for the PDD.

Regardless, Mr. McAllister thinks the PDD remains the better option as it comes with specific community benefits, such as the installation of an advanced septic system servicing the 118 homes and promises to restore wetlands in the hamlet. Mr. McAllister said he has a solid understanding of the environmental review process, pointing to his own experience reviewing similar documents. Prior to becoming the Peconic Baykeeper, Mr. McAllister spent about 15 years in south Florida working as a consultant reviewing similar studies. He was employed with the Palm Beach County government, where his main role was reviewing environmental impact statements. “I have experience in all the review work that goes into approving and considering these projects,” he said. “There might be slight differences, but they are basically the same.”

Mr. McAllister stressed that he isn’t just mindlessly supporting the project, explaining that he reviewed it with a critical eye. “I’m not afraid to call people out if science doesn’t add up,” he added.