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Keeping river clean makes sense

Local leaders ought to do all they can to protect water quality in the Mills River.

Much of the town of Mills River lies within the river's watershed and must follow state watershed density rules. The town's zoning restricts density to no more than one house per acre.

Areas outside the town, however, are only covered by Henderson County's "open-use" zoning, which does not address density, and the state watershed rules are inadequate. The county is considering a conservation zoning district that would limit development to one house per five acres in areas designated rural or agricultural. The Planning Board and commissioners ought to push the new rule through as quickly as possible.

Developers usually argue more restrictions will hamper development and hurt the local economy.

Protecting our clean water supply is the pro-growth decision. Without clean water, we'd lose the drinking water source for more than 25,000 customers and more than 57,000 residents -- better than half the county's population. Who would want to buy a home here then?

We shouldn't undersell the river's recreational value, either. The Mills River area is one of the fastest growing areas in the mountains. The river's reputation as a trout stream is attracting high-dollar developments such as the Homestead at Mills River, 166 homes on 291 acres of ridges between North and South Mills River roads, and a proposed development of about 50 homes on the Big Creek Lodge property next to the North Mills River campground.

What trout fishing enthusiast with the wherewithal wouldn't want a home just a short stroll from a trout stream? But build too many homes near the stream and suddenly it won't support trout, or much of anything else.

The good news is a stretch of the river is about to be removed from the Environmental Protection Agency's impaired classification, thanks to farmers and the Mills River Partnership, a voluntary multi-agency effort. The partnership worked with farmers to move pesticide and fertilizer mixing stations away from the 4.6-mile stretch of river downstream of Williamson Road and make the stations less likely to spill chemicals.

But protecting the Mills River is going to be a work in progress. Shaun Moore, the partnership coordinator, said now the river faces threats from erosion caused by development, and the state's watershed rules aren't helping.

Partnership monitoring of a Mills River tributary that drains the Homestead development found a 500 percent increase in mud and silt in the stream since construction began in February 2004, Moore said. Yet state inspectors found that the developer was meeting state standards for controlling runoff.

"It was obvious they have all their silt fences up and they are maintaining all their sediment basins," he said, "but there is so much water and silt coming off there it's not adequate."

When state rules fail, it's up to local government to step up and adopt rules that will keep development from killing the river and the economic development it drives.