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ST. PAUL PARK - Three of the state's leading conservation organizations and a grass-roots citizen group joined forces Wednesday to criticize a proposed mega-development on the banks of the Mississippi River that, they say, skirts state environmental laws and poses the threat of irreversible damage to sensitive natural resources.

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR), the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA), the Sierra Club North Star Chapter and Friends of the Bay filed their strongly-worded comments in response to a draft environmental review document for the proposed River's Edge development in St. Paul Park and Grey Cloud Island Township. Backed by the Texas-based developer D.R. Horton, River's Edge proposes to build 2,400 housing units and 83,000 square feet of commercial buildings around a pristine backwater bay that has been identified as a priority for conservation by the National Park Service, the Minnesota DNR and others.

Topping the list of concerns for the groups was the serious and irreversible damage the proposed development would cause to the unique and ecologically significant bay on the east side of the Mississippi. Surrounded by offshore islands and quiet backwaters, the bay (known locally as "Crystal Cove") is a haven for waterfowl, migratory birds and other wildlife that depend upon the relatively undisturbed habitat on the site, which includes limestone bluffs, rare oak savanna, sensitive floodplain areas and numerous natural springs and seeps. A bald eagle nesting site is nearby.

Much of the groups' comments focused on the developer's failure to adhere to state critical area laws. Established in 1973, the critical area laws recognize the Mississippi River corridor in the seven-county metro region as a natural resource of statewide and national significance, and they provide special protections to preserve the river's ecological, aesthetic and cultural values. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is responsible for enforcing critical area laws and standards.

"This development proposal completely undermines the critical area laws and threatens destruction of the very resources the laws were set up to protect," said Sharon Stephens, an attorney and Vice Chair of the Sierra Club Northstar Chapter. "Furthermore, if this development were to successfully get around the critical area standards, it could render the law unenforceable and open a floodgate of inappropriate development throughout the river corridor."

FMR, MCEA and Sierra Club also criticized the developer for what they describe as a misuse of state environmental review procedures aimed at deliberately downplaying serious negative impacts. Jim Erkel, an attorney and program director for MCEA's Land Use and Transportation program, said the developer's use of an Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) to consider the project's impacts appears to be an intentional effort at avoiding the more thorough examination entailed in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Erkel noted that AUARs are designed to examine environmental effects arising from many development projects covering a large geographic area, not the impacts from one mega-development.

"Given the magnitude of this development, it's clear that this project exceeds the threshold for a mandatory EIS under state law," Erkel said. "By using an AUAR limited to one specific project, the City and Township are making an end run around the hard look at alternatives and cumulative impacts that the law requires." Stephens had harsher words about the misuse of the AUAR saying, "It comes close to the 'don't ask, don't tell' process that too often occurs with the development of ecologically sensitive areas."

Friends of the Mississippi River, a metro area-based river protection group, also expressed concerns about dismissing critical area laws and the need for a full EIS, and has serious criticisms of the AUAR's inadequate assessment of the unique and high quality natural resources on the site that play an integral role in sustaining bird and wildlife populations in the river corridor. According to FMR, the presence of rare plant communities, threatened bird species and unusual geologic and hydrologic features is severely down-played in the AUAR, and strategies to mitigate impacts to these resources is virtually non-existent.

"The real problem with River's Edge is that the environmental impacts simply cannot be mitigated without making dramatic changes to the proposed development," said Irene Jones, FMR's outreach director. "It is for this reason that their primary mitigation strategy appears to be to amend all the laws and regulations they don't want to comply with."

Friends of the Bay was formed by about a dozen residents of St. Paul Park and Grey Cloud Island Twp. several months ago when a growing list of concerns and questions voiced by local citizens appeared to be falling on deaf ears. Since then the group has launched a website, put up lawn signs, conducted a door-to-door informational campaign and held a community forum that drew nearly 100 people opposed to the River's Edge development as currently proposed.

"This isn't about nimbyism or being anti-development," said Jerry Taube, a resident of Grey Cloud Island Twp. and Friends of the Bay's public affairs director. "It's about balancing growth with conservation. We realize some development would be appropriate for this area, but it shouldn't come at the expense of our quality of life or the natural resources that are a big reason most of us choose to live here."

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Copies of the comments submitted to the City of St. Paul Park are available through the following contacts:

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