



Editor-at-Large

by Jim Leutze

TRASK'S AUTUMN HALL COMMUNITY REFLECTS WILMINGTON'S LOW COUNTRY HERITAGE

Raiford Trask III is a tall, dark-haired, self-effacing, almost shy individual who is taking on one of the biggest and most complex developments in Wilmington's history — and history is going to play a leading role.

"Raiford," I said, "how did a nice guy like you end up with a project like this?" He gave me his "sorta' smile" and said, "My family's view was, 'you think you're such a smart guy with so many good ideas, you handle it!'" I couldn't tell whether this was supposed to be an endorsement or a challenge, but the project has surely turned out to be a challenge.

How do you turn an overgrown former golf course into a competitive mixed-use development in an area that already has, in New Hanover County and nearby Brunswick County, a seemingly endless list of mixed-use developments? The answer seems to be, by putting a guy in charge who knows what he likes, knows where to find professional planners who share his vision and values, and who is prepared to invest up-front in landscaping and design.

The Autumn Hall development, named after the family manse that adjoined the golf course, is a 236-acre site located along the main traffic corridor between Interstate 40 and Wrightsville Beach. The design and site preparation is far enough along that you can already get a sense of the place even though not a single building has come out of the ground. But as a harbinger of things to come — how many developments that you know of started with a winding, paved bike path? The next thing that strikes you is the trees and the care being taken to preserve them. Raiford has actually brought in signature trees from other counties that have been augmented with additional trees planted along the traffic arteries. Then there are the lakes and ponds, 10 of them by my

count, the largest covering eight acres. As we drove around, Raiford recounted the happy hours he had spent here as a child while making it clear that he wanted to preserve as much of that recreation and green space as possible.

Now before going further, let me tell you why I was so struck by Raiford's approach. Wilmington has many notable characteristics, but tree preservation is not one of them. For most developers, not all, the subtleties of site preparation are handled by bulldozers. Trees are a nuisance. You can drive heavy equipment through our tree ordinance and people regularly do. And it's a shame since the few tree-lined streets, like Market Street, from 23rd to 16th streets and the Forest Hills area, show what could have been. Many developers consider the oleander bush and the Bradford Pear tree the ideal replacement for the spreading live oak. Not so to Raiford. He points out the native trees with pride and the streets are routed to protect vegetation.

And the houses to be built? They are modeled after traditional southern styles found in Charleston, Savannah and historic Wilmington. He showed me generic architectural drawings, which very much evoked the old South. This approach also was a bit of a departure from much of the building around Wilmington. My son, who is architecturally sensitive, when driven through one large development (which shall go unnamed) said, "Wow, I can't tell whether I'm in Miami or Tucson, but I'm sure not in the Low Country South." To drive home the point of historical sensitivity, Autumn Hall has retained the services of Ed Turberg, Wilmington's leading architectural historian. Eventually there will be 500

households (300 single family and 200 multi-family units) with not one of the houses more than 400 feet from a park.

How did Raiford get this way? Well, I have my theory — he took my history course at Chapel Hill! Others, and probably most others, think it all comes from his family background — plus his personal experience. His paternal grandfather,

known as Big Raiford, loved the land and bought up numerous parcels, primarily farm land, in Southeastern North Carolina. Big Raiford was also an enthusiastic outdoorsman who passed this love on to his son and grandson. On the maternal side, the family came to this country in the 17th century; Raiford's grandmother, Mabel Dunn Hall Trask was born



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in Wilmington in 1916. Today, Trasks live up and down the Southeast Atlantic Coast from Savannah to Charleston to Wilmington. They've lived, hunted, fished, farmed and absorbed the culture of this part of the country. And Raiford naturally reflects this heritage in Autumn Hall.

Consequently, it shouldn't be surprising that Raiford was awarded the 2008 Marvin Collins Distinguished Leadership Award in the Citizen Planner category, an award presented by the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association. That group was "impressed with Mr. Trask's strong commitment and actions to preserve natural resources, create a walkable community and incorporate local, historical, architectural elements..." They also cited his commitment to the environment, "which has saved 200 trees in the first phase of the project..." Looks like *Metro* was right when Autumn Hall was awarded a MetroBravo! Award for Coastal Development. **MM**