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Third Trask is the charm

by Marimar McNaughton
Thursday, August 21, 2008

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By Marimar McNaughton • *Staff Writer*

Raiford Trask III, developer of Autumn Hall, received word earlier this month that he was the recipient of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association's 2008 Marvin Collins Distinguished Leadership Award for citizen planning. Nominated by Christine Hughes of the city of Wilmington's planning department, Trask was cited for his much-publicized tree preservation program, water quality and water reduction measures, commitment to architectural authenticity and site plan design supporting a live-and-work, walk-around community.

On a recent behind-the-scenes tour of Autumn Hall's 236 acres, Trask's aw-shucks personality emerged, along with a reverence for the land that has been held by his ancestors since 1956. Located on the site of the former Duck Haven golf course, the community unfolds from its primary entrances on Eastwood Road, and secondary entrances off Cardinal Road in College Acres, to the banks of Bradley Creek on a high sand ridge associated with southeastern North Carolina terrain, characterized by longleaf pine and black gum, and swamp chestnut oak trees brought over from Brunswick County. Here Trask buried the power lines into the

infrastructure. The site of a Trask family home on a high sand ridge overlooking Autumn Hall's eight-acre lake is the location of a proposed hotel, restaurant and amphitheatre.

273 detached-home community with 33 additional townhomes.



"My grandmother and grandfather lived back there, and her maiden name was Hall, and that's what she named the place," Trask said. "We spent a considerable amount of time trying to find a name that we all were comfortable with, that worked, and we couldn't do it. We finally said, 'Let's keep the same name.'"

As a construction team busied itself on the site of the Novant Medical Plaza, the first of many outparcels to be built, and ground crews worked tirelessly to groom the paved and guttered grounds in Phase 1, Trask navigated his Yukon SUV through the maze of on- and off-road trails from the public's main entrances on Eastwood Road to the far reaches of his vision, near the headwaters of Bradley Creek.

On Eastwood Road, passersby — drivers, cyclists, joggers, strollers and walkers — may notice freshly installed turning lanes, sidewalks and pairs of impressive tabby-coated columns, a cast iron railing buffered with freshly manicured shrubs, and flowering plants. The approach to the residential community is designed after a low country plantation, marked by an allée of live oak trees; and in lieu of an ostentatious fountain, a treed roundabout, emblematic of the developer's standards; and even though they identified 200 trees to save and 200 more to spade and move, a large number of trees had to be sacrificed.

"We're building a big community," Trask said. "It's nice to save trees, but we're also cutting a lot of trees down."

The champion red bay tree discovered by Trask and arborist Scott McGhee was one of the ones spared.

"Scott McGhee ... plays a real important role in everything we do to keep our trees healthy," Trask said.

Darlington oaks that were spaded and replanted are easy to spot for the booted green gators at their base. Each holds and slowly releases 20 gallons of water.

"It made good ecological sense; it also made good business sense. Instead of buying small trees, we got semi-mature trees, and they're all doing real well," Trask said.

The Darlington oaks outline the village green at Arbor Park, one of many green spaces reserved throughout the community. Noted for its oyster shell tabby fireplace near the main entrance, Arbor Park, just inside the Eastwood entrance, is one of the first sites to take shape.

"I really like Savannah and the way they have their squares," Trask said. "Our goal was no home would be more than 500 feet from a park, and it's turned out that it's actually no more than 400 feet from a park, and that's not just property lines, that's actually walking on the sidewalk."

Trees were saved at Long Leaf Park, and a retention pond from which the community's common areas are being irrigated with rainwater, is now spanned by Shell Bridge Park. The public will be welcomed into these common areas — in total, 51 acres — through the city of Wilmington's mixed-use ordinance, even though the tariff on high-end homes and townhomes might be prohibitive to most, with the price of townhomes starting at half a million dollars.

The architectural guidelines will blend elements of old Wilmington style into the larger context of Masonboro plantations, Wrightsville Beach cottages and stately Southport homes.

"To have cultural authenticity was really important," Trask said. "I've always been disappointed to see what people built that didn't have any roots in the area's roots. I wanted to enhance what was here. I don't think it'll hurt anything."

Trask stopped his vehicle on his grandparents' old homesite, now vacant, where a hotel, restaurant and amphitheatre are planned on the eight-acre manmade lake excavated by his grandfather, Raiford Trask Sr., in 1960 during the construction of College Acres.

"I spent many an hour catching bass in that lake," the third generation developer said as he envisioned the new homes that will one day be built along the water's edge. A relic tee box from the Duck Haven era marks the site of the future Creek Club, designed as a respite for kayakers. Here in the farthest corner of Autumn Hall, the roar of the 5 o'clock commuter traffic dulls to a low hum, replaced by the splash of jumping fish and calling birds, and

Raiford Trask III lingers to relish his boyhood past and savor the present moment.