

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2006](#)

## news

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# All downhill from here

## Engineering report digs into Bartram's Walk

by Cecil Bothwell

A report commissioned by the grassroots group Friends of Town Mountain concludes that the proposed Town Mountain Cove development, formerly known as Bartram's Walk, "could increase the risk of slope instability" on the 130 acre parcel just outside the city limits in Beaverdam.

The report was produced by Golder Associates of Atlanta, an employee-owned geohazard-assessment firm with more than 4,500 staffers working in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and the Americas. Golder has offices in at least 27 states and more than 130 worldwide.

Friends of Town Mountain, a nonprofit formed by residents of the upscale neighborhood several months ago, hired Golder to assess the site after the Buncombe County Planning Board approved preliminary plans in August for a development variously called Bartram's Walk, Town Mountain Cove and Town Mountain Bluffs.



**Backfield in motion** Town Mountain residents Jerry Birdwell (left) and Joe Sechler share concerns about the geologic stability of a

**Joe Sechler** called on the Planning Board to revisit its decision, saying the study had confirmed his group's concerns.

"Rock-slope instability from existing road cuts has been documented," and "most of the proposed parcels exceed the lot configurations (i.e., lot size and frontage) required for low-density developments as provided in the Beaverdam Community Land Use Ordinance," notes the inch-thick report, prepared and signed by a team of geologists, hydrogeologists and engineers. The hefty document includes detailed maps of slide-prone areas, suggestions for limits on road cuts and fills, and recommendations for more detailed study and "global stability analysis" (a comprehensive study of soil structure and slope that estimates the likelihood of future soil movement).



**A hatch job:** A geotechnical report by Golder Associates includes this map. Town Mountain Cove lots that may not meet county steep-slope regulations are marked with red cross-hatching.

proposed development site in  
Beaverdam township. photo  
by Jonathan Welch

"None of these [recommendations] has been done or considered," said Sechler, "and they should have been required at the outset for the first application submitted by the developer – an out-of-state investment company whose representative admitted publicly that they had never done a mountain subdivision before." The representative,

Atlanta-based landscape architect **Tom Daniel**, made that statement at a community meeting in early August (see "Bartram's What?" Aug. 9 *Xpress*).

In an e-mail to *Xpress*, **Jerry Birdwell**, who serves on the nonprofit's Executive Committee, wrote:

"It is baffling to me why Buncombe County officials have so far shown such indifference to potential hazards [posed by] steep-slope, high-density development in this county in view of multiple landslides in Western North Carolina, at least one of which resulted in the loss of life. ...

"As my home was under construction, the owner/builder (from out of state) on the lot next to me ordered a major clear-cut for a view and home site. After lengthy blasting and cuts and filling, the house was completed. He then sold it three years later.

"Within the first week after the new owners took possession, during a rainy week, cracks began to show up in the fill areas. As rains increased, the fill land began to slide, increasing as the rain increased. My new neighbors, in fear for their lives, moved into a hotel during evaluation of the safety of the house. 'Fortunately,' only one corner of the foundation moved. Ultimately, a \$130,000 engineered retaining wall stabilized the house, but the garage and parking area were lost. Rocks and debris covered two streets and a multi-acre building site below. Today, the slide-area scar can be seen from the Haw Creek overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway."

Birdwell's neighbor, who declined to be named in print, confirmed the details of the story. Birdwell's own building contractor, he noted, "was super-cautious. We did very little clearing and, in fact, may have left trees too close to the house." But clear-cutting next door, he noted, "opened up a wind tunnel, and we have lost 13 or more 75- to 100-year-old trees that have been blown down."

In recent weeks, multiple parcels included in the proposed development have been sold to **T. Roger Page** of Forsyth County and/or one of his businesses, Page Enterprises, which has offices in Winston-Salem. At press time, Page had not returned repeated phone calls.

The Golder report is the second engineering study commissioned by the Friends of Town Mountain. An earlier evaluation prepared by Arden-based geotechnical engineer **B. Dan Marks** concluded that the proposed plans didn't comply with the county's slope-development regulations in effect at the time of approval and should have been rejected on that basis.

"Although the Friends of Town Mountain Executive Committee shared the Marks Report with the Buncombe Planning Board weeks ago, it has yet to acknowledge its mistake in granting approval for the meager, one-page blueprint submitted for such a massive development on a steep mountainside," said Sechler. "We also will share the new Golder Report with the county Board of Commissioners and the Planning Board."

Asked about the current status of the development, county Zoning Administrator **Jim Coman** said, "I haven't seen the engineer for this project in at least two months, and there's been no change of status since August."

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The next Planning Board meeting is scheduled for Monday, Dec. 18, 9:30 a.m. in the county Training Room, 191 College St. in downtown Asheville.