



February 8, 2025

The Honorable Brandy Amidon, Mayor
Members of Travelers Rest City Council
City of Travelers Rest
125 Trailblazer Road
Travelers Rest, SC 29690

Re: Proposed Hotel Complex on Paris Mountain

Dear Mayor Amidon and Members of Council:

I am writing you on behalf of Naturaland Trust to convey our perspective on the proposed hotel development on the face of Paris Mountain on Altamont Road. We understand that no application has been submitted to you as of yet, but from press reports the developer intends to do so. We write to urge you to reject this proposal if it is presented to you.

First, let me emphasize that Naturaland Trust has for decades enjoyed working with neighborhoods and families around Travelers Rest and with the City of Travelers Rest to protect special places and the beautiful natural heritage of the area. Among other things, Naturaland Trust and the members of its Board have played key roles in establishing Poinsett Park; acquiring and opening the Swamp Rabbit Trail; acquiring key segments of the Swamp Rabbit Trail both south and north of Travelers Rest; protecting the Spring Park Inn; and protecting a number of properties around Travelers Rest, including nature preserves for the endangered Bunched Arrowhead and conserved properties along the Saluda Rivers. We have also worked successfully with Council and the City's Planning Commission to protect populations of the Bunched Arrowhead when developments have been proposed in the City and are in the process of cleaning up and restoring the preserve to be established at the corner of Coleman and East Bowers Road.

Another of our projects has been a years-long effort to protect the Furman Face of Paris Mountain – the forested side of the mountain that is the viewshed of Highway 276 on the approach to Travelers Rest. We and our funders (including individual donors, local foundations, and local, state, and national grantmakers) have invested millions of dollars and much effort in acquiring properties to protect the ecology of this part of the Mountain and the beautiful view from Poinsett Highway. This proposed hotel is very near the western end of the collection of properties we have protected to date on the Furman Face.

For a number of reasons, we believe that this project and Travelers Rest's approval of this project, if it is ever proposed to the City, would be very harmful to the City of Travelers Rest, to our community's environmental protections, to the natural resources of Paris Mountain, and to our community as a whole.

Background. The proposed hotel would be built on Parcel A on this map. Parcel A is located on Altamont Road. We will refer to it as the Altamont Road Lot.



The Altamont Road Lot (Parcel A) is protected by one of Greenville County's most important and protective environmental provisions, the Environmentally Sensitive District for Paris Mountain (sometimes referred to as ESD-PM), Section 8.5 of the County's Zoning Ordinance. This district was established to protect the environmentally sensitive nature of Paris Mountain by encouraging the safe placement of structures in conformance with the natural landform, landscape, and existing plant life. Under that Environmentally Sensitive District, commercial uses are not permitted, hotels specifically are not allowed, and there are requirements for homes as well. In short, no hotel can be built on Altamont Road. Table 6-1 of the Zoning Ordinance.

There are extremely good reasons for this Environmentally Sensitive District. This side of the Mountain is largely a contiguous forest. The terrain is very steep. It contains headwaters streams for the Reedy River. There is a healthy wildlife population on this part of the Mountain, including bear, bobcat, deer, and migrating songbirds. Intense development would cause severe stormwater runoff and pollution, as well as the risk of landslides. And the face of the Mountain is the viewshed for Poinsett Highway as it approaches Furman and the Travelers Rest area.

According to press reports, the developer is proposing a project that is absolutely prohibited by this environmental protection and is stunning in its incompatibility with Paris Mountain and two-lane, curvy Altamont Road. The developer would build a 150,000 square foot hotel, a restaurant and bar, a 750-person banquet hall, and a wedding venue.

The only way the developer can conceive of this expansive development is by wiping out the environmental protections of the Environmentally Sensitive District. The developer can achieve that elimination only with active participation by the City of Travelers Rest.

The developer proposes to wipe away the environmental protections that benefit Paris Mountain by engaging in a gerrymandering stretch of municipal annexation. Paris Mountain has never been part of the City of Travelers Rest, and the Mountain is not adjacent to the City itself. The proposed site of the hotel is not adjacent to any part of the City of Travelers Rest.

However, a decade or so ago, the City annexed the property owned by Furman University. Furman owns a strip of property separated from the Furman campus on the east side of Poinsett Highway. This property is on the opposite side of the Furman property from where the Furman campus touches the City of Travelers Rest. There is an oddly shaped so-called “Flag Lot” that has a narrow corridor that extends down to Old Buncombe Road – Parcel B on the map. The bottom edge of that narrow corridor is across Old Buncombe Road from the northernmost tip of the isolated strip of Furman property. The Altamont Road lot touches a segment of the north boundary of the Flag Lot. By acquiring this Flag Lot, the developer is pursuing an elongated attempt at annexation.

The developer contemplates that the City of Travelers Rest will engage in this acrobatic annexation: From the northern tip of the isolated strip on the opposite side of the Furman University property, jump over Old Buncombe Road to the bottom tip of narrow corridor of the Flag Lot, run up the narrow Flag Lot corridor to the northern boundary segment that connects to the Altamont Road Lot, and thereby annex the Altamont Road Lot in order to wipe out the environmental protections that apply along Altamont Road on Paris Mountain. It also appears that the developer contemplates that after annexation, the City of Travelers Rest will grant the developer whatever zoning the developer requests to allow this large hotel complex to be built on the side of Paris Mountain on Altamont Road, to replace the environmental protections set out in the Environmentally Sensitive District.

This Proposal, If Accepted, Would Severely Damage the Reputation of the City of Travelers Rest. Travelers Rest has a deserved reputation as an attractive municipality nestled in an area of natural beauty that exists in harmony with its surroundings. Outdoor activities, the Swamp Rabbit Trail, biking, beautiful forests, river recreation, and parks are all part of its identity.

If the City followed the developer’s lead, the City would tarnish its reputation by becoming a means to wipe out environmental protections for an environmentally sensitive part of Greenville County. Paris Mountain is an iconic landmark in Greenville County and the Upstate region and an important part of the area in which Travelers Rest is located. Travelers Rest could not maintain its well-recognized reputation if it were working with one or more developers to eliminate the environmental protections for Paris Mountain. It is hard to overstate the harm that this proposal, if accepted, could do to the reputation of the City with its neighbors and with people who value and treasure our natural resources.

This Proposal Would Do Severe Harm to Environmental Protections. This proposal is designed to eliminate existing environmental protections for this property on Altamont Road. If this awkward annexation were adopted, many more bad things could follow. Then, other “adjacent” properties along and across Altamont Road could be subject to similar schemes, and with each annexation, even more could follow. This approach would open the door to potential additional immense harms to the environment of Paris Mountain.

This Development Would Do Significant Harm to Paris Mountain and Its Viewshed. The terrain below Altamont Road is steep and forested. Much of the mountain face is rock, and rock is near the surface underneath much of the landscape. There are deep ravines that run down the mountainside. Headwaters of the Reedy River emerge on this side of the Mountain.

The tree cutting, earth moving, and construction activity on the property for a project of this size is hard to contemplate. It is also hard to understand how the stormwater from such a large commercial complex and its ongoing activities can be managed or controlled and how this proposal would not do significant harm to the Reedy River headwater streams and the mountainside. The viewshed of Paris Mountain from Poinsett Highway will be altered forever. This facility is not consistent with the wildlife populations that exist on the Mountain.

There are other concerns that other organizations and citizens have expressed, such as traffic on Altamont Road, fire protection, and safe cycling. Just from an environmental perspective, this proposal is bad for Travelers Rest, environmental protection in Greenville County, and the natural integrity of Paris Mountain and its surrounding ecology.

Developer’s Arguments. We have read the developer put forward arguments for this development. We would like to respond to them.

First, the developer has claimed that this proposed hotel project is a return to a southern heritage because there was once a hotel on Paris Mountain. There was a 23-room wooden Altamont Hotel on the Mountain in the 1890s, which was reached by horse-drawn coach. It went out of business and burned down in 1920.

Obviously, the historical story of a small 19th Century horse-and-buggy hotel that operated for a limited period is no conceivable justification for building this large hotel complex over a century later during an era of heavy traffic, a totally different landscape, and environmental challenges.

Second, the press reports that the developer has stated that it will turn the Flag Lot into a park, and we understand that the developer has raised the idea that undesirable development could happen on the Flag Lot. These arguments are no excuse for allowing this incompatible development.

It is apparent from this proposal that the purpose of the Flag Lot is to provide a connection to the Altamont Road lot as a basis for annexation of the Altamont Road lot and elimination of its environmental protections. Further, the Flag Lot does not appear to be desirable for development. The Flag Lot contains very steep slopes, deep ravines, and a number

of streams. Its only access is through the narrow strip that reaches down to Old Buncombe Road.

For construction, this terrain would be very challenging. The permitting for land disturbance and to fill or impact the streams on the property would be very challenging also. Stormwater management would be another problem. And the access is not ideal.

If and when any development proposal is put forward for the Flag Lot, that proposal can be subject to public examination. It is also possible that other protections beyond those in place now could be put in place to ensure that harmful development does not occur on that lot.

But the threat of some possible bad development proposal for the Flag Lot is not justification for the many harms that would result from the proposed development of the Altamont Road Lot. Nor is the claimed creation of a park on this very steep property a justification for the harms that would be done by this development. This argument should not distract anyone's attention from the problems and harms inherent in the development proposal.

Third, the developer puts forward the standard economic development arguments. The key economic assets for this area of Greenville County are its natural beauty and its natural resources. They should not be compromised for a development like this one. We also question whether any revenues received by the City would compensate for the long-term ongoing costs. But we believe the harm done the City's reputation and the surrounding environment would far outweigh any claimed revenues.

Finally, we understand that the developer plans to produce reports from one or more consultants. I would urge the City to read those reports with a very skeptical eye. In my experience, the consultants hired by developers write reports that seek to support the developers' plans. Sometimes, they can be entirely wrong on key points. I would urge you not to defer to any such reports produced by the developer.

Conclusion. The City of Travelers Rest is a point of pride for this region, and its natural surroundings are one of our treasures. Naturaland Trust and its board members have worked for years in ways that benefit both. We respectfully urge the City to reject this proposal both in the best interests of the City and the best interests of our natural world. If the opportunity were to arise, we would be glad to work with any and all interested parties to achieve a conservation solution, as we have in the past.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Frank Holleman
President

