

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

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January 13, 2020

Ms. Mary Hope Green
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
69-A Hagood Avenue
Charleston, SC 29403-5107

Re: P/N SAC-2016-01087, American Mortgage and Investment Co., Berkeley County

Dear Ms. Green:

Personnel with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have reviewed the above referenced project and offer the following for your consideration.

The proposed work consists of placing fill material and performing excavation in 8.71 acres of freshwater wetlands and waters of the U. S. for construction of a residential development, associated infrastructure, utilities, and stormwater management features. As mitigation, the applicant proposes the preservation of 13.94 acres of jurisdictional wetlands, 0.23 acres of non-jurisdictional wetlands, and 670 linear feet/0.23 acre of jurisdictional tributaries within the project development. In addition, the applicant proposes the preservation of 79.13 acres of wetlands and 1,419 linear feet/0.39 acre of perennial tributaries within the adjacent PRM parcels. The project purpose as stated by the applicant is "to construct a residential development that will meet the rising housing needs in proximity to future infrastructure, civic services, and employment opportunities associated with the Town of Monck Corner."

The area proposed for impact consists of forested, palustrine wetlands located in the headwaters of Molly Branch, a tributary of the Cooper River. The areas proposed for impact consist of wetlands that are saturated to seasonally flooded and vegetated with a mixed hardwood/pine plant community. Forested wetlands such as those found on the project site provide a number of important ecological and water resource functions, including habitat for a variety of wildlife species. The predominance of woody plant communities and the abundance of snags associated with forested wetlands provide foraging, cover, and nesting habitat for birds, herptiles and mammals. Large contiguous areas of forested wetland are especially important as protective corridors for animal movements. Forested wetlands store and restrict storm waters, reducing the potential for damaging flood events and provide water quality protection for downstream systems through the retention and assimilation of upland runoff and associated pollutants. These wetland systems also provide large volumes of organic material for consumption in aquatic environments.

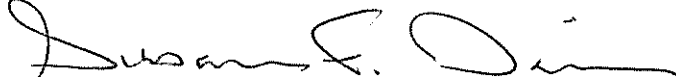
The project as proposed would result in the filling, excavation and permanent loss of a significant area of important freshwater wetlands. The Cooper River drainage basin has been significantly impacted by previous drainage and development activities, contributing to its overall

degradation. The protection of headwater wetland systems such as those found on the project site is essential in maintaining and improving water quality and wildlife habitat within the Cooper River watershed. The current development plan involves significant impacts to important headwater wetlands, including the excavation of 1.48 acres of wetlands for stormwater pond construction. The project plans include significant areas of uplands not designated for lot or pond development. Project impacts should be minimized by utilizing available site uplands to the maximum extent possible for development. A total of 14.4 acres of undisturbed wetlands are to be preserved on-site. While not appropriate as compensatory mitigation, the protection of these remaining on-site wetlands would provide important mitigation in the form of avoidance and minimization. It should be noted that this project would be eligible for a 25% reduction in required mitigation credits if the area of wetlands protected on-site is at least 3 times that of the acreage to be impacted. Contrary to statements by the applicant, the protection of wetlands off-site do not contribute to eligibility for this reduction.

As mitigation for project impacts, the applicant proposes the preservation of 79.13 acres of wetlands and 1,419 linear feet/0.39 acre of perennial tributaries within two adjacent parcels. Properties to be protected include highly fragmented, non-contiguous wetland parcels currently owned by the applicant. Given the fragmented configuration of these areas, the protection of these areas is highly questionable and the DNR does not consider this to be reasonable or adequate mitigation for project impacts. There are mitigation bank credits available within this watershed and the DNR recommends unavoidable wetland impacts be mitigated through the purchase of available credits from an approved mitigation bank. It should be noted that the applicant used the incorrect Corps SOP worksheets in calculating the required and proposed wetland credits. Using the correct worksheets, the applicant would be required to provide approximately 99.4 mitigation credits.

The DNR recommends that the project as currently proposed not be issued and the applicant considers less damaging project designs that significantly reduce wetland impacts and that an alternative mitigation strategy as outlined above is implemented. If you have any questions regarding these recommendations, please contact me at daviss@dnr.sc.gov or 843.953.9003.

Sincerely,



Susan F. Davis
Coastal Environmental Coordinator

Cc: SCDHEC/Ress
OCRM/Stout
USEPA
USFWS
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