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Supes put time limit on exposed soil

Cover it up

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Call it the ultimate red dirt alert. Several years ago, during development of Hollymead Town Centre on 29N, a large swath of bare ground sat with no vegetation. Seasons passed, and every rainstorm washed away more soil.

"We live downstream from Hollymead Town Centre," said Scott Elliff, a director of the Forest Lakes Community Association, speaking at the August 5 Board of Supervisors meeting. "[Forest Lakes has] been substantially damaged by the development process, to the tune of \$1 million or more." During the years when the Town Centre was denuded, he said, sediment from the site eroded into Lake Hollymead at Forest Lakes 28 times faster than it would in normal conditions. \$1 million is what Elliff says it will now cost to dredge the lake.

It wasn't just Hollymead that prompted an amendment to the county's water protection ordinance, which the supervisors unanimously approved. As county staff indicated in their report to the board, there's a loophole in state erosion control regulations that some developers have exploited. Builders are supposed to stabilize areas that will sit dormant for more than 30 days, but some have performed nominal grading just before that 30-day deadline to avoid planting grass or otherwise preventing erosion.

Now, at the start of any project, the clock will begin ticking on a nine-month deadline for builders to plant permanent vegetation and stabilize soil. Developers can ask for extensions from county staff, and then from the supervisors, if they can't finish. But during the public hearing on the amendment, contractor David Mitchell said that such extensions would not give builders enough flexibility. "Having an engineering and construction decision made by a political body is cumbersome and it's not fair," he said.

Nonetheless, the board ultimately responded to the urgings of environmentalists including the Southern Environmental Law Center's Morgan Butler, who helped develop the proposal. "That dirt suffocates the life out of streams and rivers," Butler said.