

# International Paper: Agents of Sprawl

Forest loss in the Southeastern United States is draining our region, ecologically, economically and aesthetically. International Paper Corporation, the world's largest pulp and paper company, has an insatiable appetite to gobble up Southern forests for paper products that clog the shelves at stores like office supply retail giant, Staples. The multinational produced the most pulp out of all of the forest products companies in the South, turning forests into pulp at a rate of 37,225 tons per 24 hours at their chip mills.<sup>i</sup> Despite International Paper's chip mills, and hundreds of thousands of acres of clearcuts, the forest products industry consistently denies that they are responsible for forest loss. Instead they blame suburban sprawl:

**Michael Klein, a spokesman for the American Forestry and Paper Association stated that,**

***“When you're looking at things like urban sprawl, there's 40 acres a day being plowed under...that's for development. If trees get cut by the industry, they get replanted.”<sup>ii</sup>***

However, many prominent forest and paper companies develop land themselves or sell their land for development purposes. International Paper (IP) is guilty of over one hundred thousand acres of planned or existing residential developments throughout the Southeast. Particularly in coastal areas where retirees are flocking and land values have sky rocketed. IP converted the natural coastal wetlands of the South to pine plantations and thousands of acres of timber holdings to residential developments. The South has experienced astounding sprawl in the past ten years. Of the ten states with the most conversion of rural land and woodland to residential and commercial development from 1992-1997, six were in the South.<sup>iii</sup>

International Paper's shift to real estate development is, in one sense, a microcosm of the larger trend among big timber organizations. Waterfront Properties, a subsidiary of Weyerhaeuser Real Estate Company, has seventeen developments that pepper the Pamlico Sound in coastal North Carolina<sup>iv</sup>. Their larger golf communities, Taberna (New Bern, NC) and Cypress Landing (Chocowinity, NC), offer plush houses and golf to retirees.<sup>v vi</sup> In another sense, it is an oddity. One South Carolina resident noted that, “Westvaco holds on to their land, you won't see them developing it like International Paper.”<sup>vii</sup>

Like Weyerhaeuser, International Paper has an active real estate arm: International Paper Realty Corp. In addition, through their acquisition of Union Camp Corporation in 2000, International Paper obtained Branigar Organization.<sup>viii</sup> Branigar Organization is one of the biggest, oldest developers in the South. Their development, “The Landings” at Skidaway Island 12 miles southeast of Savannah, was the original model for the Southern coastal resort<sup>ix</sup>. International Paper Real Estate and Branigar Organization together form an experienced development company that has massive land holdings and developments throughout the Southeast. According to International Paper, Branigar Organization, “...is responsible for 70,000 acres, and has residential and commercial projects in Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina.”<sup>x</sup> And International Paper Realty has thousands more acres that they are responsible for developing. The table below quantifies International Paper/ Branigar Organization developments or real estate sales in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

<b>Developer</b>	<b>SOLD OR DEVELOPED</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Acreage</b>
Branigar Organization	Developed	Champion Hills <sup>xi</sup>	Hendersonville, NC	700
Branigar Organization	Sold	The Peninsula <sup>xii</sup>	Jasper County, SC	487
Branigar Organization	Sold	????	Jasper County, SC	300
Branigar Organization	Developing	Argent Tract <sup>xiii</sup>	Jasper County, SC	16,000
Branigar Organization	Developing	Hardeeville Tract <sup>xiv</sup>	Jasper County, SC	35,000
Branigar Organization	Sold	Pooler Park <sup>xv</sup>	Savannah, GA	68.3
Branigar Organization	Developed	Golden Isles Gateway <sup>xvi</sup>	Glynn County, GA	7824
Branigar Organization	Developed	Berwick Plantation <sup>xvii</sup>	Chatham County, GA	1911
Branigar Organization	Developed	The Landings <sup>xviii</sup>	Skidaway Island	4450
Branigar Organization	Sold	Palmetto Bluff, Buckwalter Tract & Schults Tract <sup>xix</sup>	Bluffton, SC	26,600
International Paper Realty	Developed	Haig Point <sup>xx</sup>	Daufuskie Island, SC	1050
International Paper Realty	Developed	Carolina Forest <sup>xxi</sup>	Myrtle Beach	12,000
International Paper Realty	Sold	Barefoot Resort <sup>xxii</sup>	Myrtle Beach	2377
International Paper Realty	Developed	Brunswick Forest <sup>xxiii</sup>	Brunswick County, NC	5800
International Paper Realty	Sold	Carolina Waterway Plantation <sup>xxiv</sup>	Myrtle Beach, SC	207
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>114,774.3</b>

Many of these tracts of land are in the process of development or in planning stages. The large-scale conversion of timberland to developments is above all a *recent and ongoing* phenomenon. As a corporate landowner, International Paper has not shown the same level of commitment or connection to their land as private landowners. Because they don't live on the land they use, International Paper has less incentive than an individual landowner to protect the land. Their actions and land management decisions appear to be driven solely by profit-seeking motives.

The following case studies illustrate the specifics of International Paper's development tactics, from land use to interactions with city and county governments. In many cases, International Paper has rendered wetlands developable through years of pine monoculture. Previously inexpensive land in economically marginal areas has become very valuable as International Paper has acquired favorable development agreements with small towns. In addition to overcutting for timber, International Paper has destroys forests for suburbanization. In Bluffton, SC, Horry County, SC and Winnabow, NC, International Paper is the primary agent of sprawl.

### **Beat the Takeover: Bluffton, SC**

Bluffton, SC is a small town in southern Beaufort County, located less than ten miles from Hilton Head. With 1000 residents and about one square mile of property, the community is also near towns and coastal islands turned vacation get-aways and retirement villages. In 1998, nearly all of the land around Bluffton was owned by Union Camp Corp., a timber company that International Paper bought in 2000. That same year Union Camp's real estate subsidiary, Branigar Organization, approached Bluffton and proposed that the small town annex over 20,000

acres of Union Camp land split into three distinct tracts: The Palmetto Bluff Tract, The Buckwalter Tract, and the Schults Tract.<sup>xxv</sup> Prior to the Branigar Organization's overtures, the land value skyrocketed as the entire southern portion of Beaufort County opened for development throughout the 80s and 90s and nearby Hilton Head became a hugely popular resort. The timber company land had become too valuable to grow trees on. As a developer, Branigar Organization had had difficulty making much money on their development at Skidaway Island in Georgia. The most profitable course of action, as it would be for International Paper in other situations, was to gain a generous master development agreement with Bluffton and subsequently sell the land off in large blocks for luxurious developments. Bluffton citizens and private property owners simply could not effectively fight the annexation in the face of Branigar Organization's wealth and power.

While the northern portion of Beaufort County is known for "zoning shopping," where developers seek the most lax zoning regulations to maximize profits from their developments, the practice was less common in the southern portion of the county.<sup>xxvi</sup> Only after South Carolina legislation required Beaufort County to create a Comprehensive Land Use Plan, did officials from Branigar Organization, approach the Bluffton Town Council proposing that the town annex 49 square miles of timber company land for development purposes.<sup>xxvii</sup> While town members might have been able to personally approach another individual citizen with such a plan, the corporation was both extremely large and disproportionately powerful.

The Bluffton Town Council found itself in an unenviable position. They could either annex the land of a huge corporation and attempt to control what development took place there, or refuse to annex the land and watch as neighboring Jasper County annexed it and development that they had no control over consumed the land across the May River from their community. Essentially, Union Camp Corp. had the power and residents had little real choice. Development would happen on the land, the only question was how much control Bluffton would have. A volatile situation arose, at stake were the small-town character of Bluffton and the political sovereignty of the original residents and local private property owners. Political divisiveness erupted within Bluffton, spawning two citizens groups: Concerned Citizens of Bluffton and Citizens for Annexation. The Concerned Citizens of Bluffton distributed bumper stickers reading, "Beat the Takeover. Vote No."<sup>xxviii</sup>

The two groups warred until a referendum in 1998, where annexation supporters won out. After the annexation, the town of Bluffton had grown from a town of one square mile to 49 square miles. Growth is a divisive issue in South Carolina where, while the population grew 5.3% from 1992-1997, the developed land grew 30.2%, almost six times the rate of the population.<sup>xxix</sup> Bluffton will stand out, even by South Carolina standards. Town planner Josh Martin said, "It's crazy. We're at just over 1,000 residents now and we're projected to grow to 40,000 or 50,000 in 20 years."<sup>xxx</sup>

When International Paper purchased Union Camp Corp, thereby acquiring Branigar Organization, Master Plan Agreements for Planned Unit Developments had been reached for the annexed tracts of land known as the Palmetto Bluff Tract, the Schults Tract and the Buckwalter Tract. The Master Plans raised the value of the land substantially. In August of 2000, as part of a

buy-out deal with International Paper, Branigar Organization sold the Palmetto Bluff Tract to Walcam LLC for \$100 million, and the Schults Tract for \$7 million.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Bluffton tried to exercise some control over Branigar Organization in their Master Plan negotiations by using strict stormwater ordinances as their point of leverage. As stated by community member Jacob Preston, "The community is a commodity to them. As long as it is in their best interest to have a pristine estuary then we have grounds for a productive conversation."<sup>xxxix</sup> However, Branigar Organization ignored the town character and political structure that will inevitably be undermined by the annexation. The loss of town identity and individuality disproportionately impacts black residents of Bluffton. Given that they are currently a minority with limited political power, the huge influx of wealthy white citizens can only serve to make their political clout more diffuse. Resident Bill Carver said, "To lose Bluffton's identity is a very sad thing to me. Southern Beaufort County is going to become wealthy, white and Republican."<sup>xxxix</sup> If Hilton Head Island's Ward 1 is a model, black citizens of Bluffton can expect that the annexation of International Paper land will spell political disempowerment. Overall, the annexation has robbed Bluffton of something far more valuable than the millions that the development may pour into town coffers: their cultural identity.

### **Sprawl off the Grand Strand: Horry County, SC**

International Paper Realty Corp. was not anticipating controversy when they chose to develop 12,000 acres of their land in a Horry County, South Carolina. Myrtle Beach, South Carolina is not a place that strictly controls new developments. In fact, the Grand Strand on North Myrtle Beach is arguably one of the most overdeveloped places in the country.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Resident Gloria Bonali said, "In my opinion, it's almost gotten out of hand. They've almost paved over the place. You drive by one day and see certain things, and two days later, it's not there, or there's something else."<sup>xxxv</sup>

And the population of Horry County, SC is exploding with 23.9% population growth from 1990 through 1999.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In that context, Carolina Forest is a sprawling addition to a poorly planned city. While population has skyrocketed in Myrtle Beach, development has grown at twice the speed of population, fueling the proliferation of strip malls and car dependent development. And International Paper's dealings in Horry County are not limited to the 12,000-acre development. In the late 1990s, International Paper sold 2377 acres of land to Silver Carolina Development for the construction of the Barefoot Resort.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The EPA investigated the property in 2000 due to the presence of potentially illegal wetlands drainage ditches on the land, but the landowners were eventually cleared.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The central importance of Carolina Forest lies in both its massive scale and its poor placement. It is accessible only from a large highway and is bordered by a strip mall with a Kroger's and a series of other chain stores. The development has a twenty-year plan that will create housing for 25,000 new residents. Located just outside of the Myrtle Beach town-limits, any Smart Growth considerations important to the town are immaterial to Carolina Forest residents who are under the county's jurisdiction. Inclusion with the larger community will be limited, even for children in Carolina Forest. International Paper designed and included Carolina Forest Elementary School, and a middle school and high school are planned.

Horry County is known as a very pro-development area. International Paper is at the forefront of this movement, and the environmental costs of this mindset are particularly felt near the Carolina Forest development. To the north, Carolina Forest is bordered by the 10,000-acre

Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve, home to healthy populations of black bears, raccoons, deer, and bays with a host of endangered plant species. As a development, Carolina Forest threatens this ecosystem in a variety of ways. Radio telemetry has shown that the 21 black bears known to use part of the Preserve as their home also roam frequently into the currently undeveloped portions of Carolina Forest land, as well as the golf courses.<sup>xxxix</sup>

“There is a negative impact any time you convert habitat to living space for people. The bears can adapt to people, but people can’t adapt to bears,” comments H.W. Harter who has been studying the bears since 1999<sup>xl</sup>.

The greater threat to ecosystem health and the genetic diversity of animal populations in the Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve may stem from the highway construction to accommodate the development. While the Conway By-Pass was constructed by Fluor Daniel with specific consideration for wildlife and corridors beneath it, the Carolina Bays Scenic Parkway that bisects the black bear habitat incorporates no such considerations and has destroyed wildlife corridors.<sup>xli</sup>

More importantly, the health of the longleaf pine and Carolina bay ecosystem in the Preserve is dependent on prescribed burning every few years. After International Paper develops Carolina Forest up to their property line with the Preserve, these burns will be increasingly difficult to administer due to smoke management concerns. No mention of the Preserve was made in the Master Development Plan,<sup>xlii</sup> so without specific provisions protecting it, Carolina Forest will undoubtedly impact the ecosystem of the Preserve. Without burning, many of the berry and succulent species upon which the bears depend will be threatened as well.

Further, Jamie Dozir who administers the Preserve noted that even if the Lewis Bay Ocean Heritage Preserve made an agreement with International Paper, after IP has sold the property to someone else and the new owners find a third party to develop the land, that group has no clue about the Preserve or the ecosystem’s need for prescribed burning.<sup>xliii</sup> The threats that this sprawl development poses to the Lewis Ocean Bay Heritage Preserve are apparently immaterial to International Paper.

As in Beaufort County, International Paper is one of the biggest corporations in Horry County. Without a vigilant local government, International Paper can do whatever it wants with land in Horry County despite the eventual costs to other landowners as they lose species diversity and their rural lifestyle.

### **Living Corporate: Brunswick County, NC**

Formerly, citizens chose to create and administer new towns. Now that power has shifted to corporations such as International Paper. As a huge landowner, International Paper can control and create communities. Near the small town of Winnabow, in Brunswick County, NC this process is afoot. Despite public outcry, in August 2000 Brunswick County officials approved the rezoning of 5,793.7 acres of International Paper land to allow the company to build a new town: Brunswick Forest.<sup>xliv</sup> Brunswick Forest will be a physical manifestation of International Paper’s lack of respect for other landowners around their property and their irresponsible land ownership practices. Preliminary findings indicate that the “bedroom community”<sup>xlv</sup> will be a permanent change to the land that will rob neighbors of their rural lifestyle and will bring thousands of new people into the area.

Like Carolina Forest, Brunswick Forest will center around 600 acres of golf course. And like Carolina Forest, the development will essentially be a new town that incorporates elementary, middle school and high school sites, EMS, a fire station, a post office, police stations

and a library.<sup>xlvi</sup> Like Bluffton, SC, Winnabow, NC is a small, unincorporated community that has substantially fewer legal and economic resources than International Paper. While the new town being constructed by IP is estimated to have 9915 housing units, and will have 20,000 or more residents,<sup>xlvii</sup> the town of Winnabow itself is a community with only 3084 residents. From 1990-2000 the population of Brunswick County exploded, growing 43.5%.<sup>xlviii</sup> However, it is still a small place with only about 73,143 residents.<sup>xlix</sup> Further, Brunswick County's residents are poorer, on average, than the rest of the nation and their fellow North Carolinians. An estimated 14.0% of Brunswick County residents are below the poverty line<sup>1</sup> as opposed to 13.3% nationally, and 22.7% of children in the county are below the poverty line, compared to 19.9% nationally.<sup>li</sup> With housing prices in Brunswick Forest projected to range from \$89,000-\$400,000 it is dubious that the housing development is intended for current Brunswick County residents. Rather, wealthy retirees will probably comprise the majority of new homeowners, as they have in other new coastal developments. Brunswick Forest is both culturally out of sync with the surrounding area and another manifestation of International Paper's real estate division in combination with lax local government.

Local resident Gean Seay noted the potential infrastructure problems associated with the influx of Brunswick Forest denizens, "The bridge that connects New Hanover County and Brunswick County is already out of date. With 20,000 more people and traffic backing up on it, it will be a nightmare, and if you have a hurricane evacuation..."<sup>lii</sup>

Area residents are not unaware of the problems that will accompany development, and they know the corporation that is to blame. Resident Sheila Moore notes that, "International Paper hides behind a smokescreen of self-awarded gold medals for their environmental excellence, quietly making deals, paving roads, and building houses. I have seen the hideous secret child of International Paper . . . and its name is 'Sprawl'."

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the Southeast, International Paper has not only actively created sprawl developments for their own monetary gain, they have done so at the cost of local autonomy and environmental quality. International Paper destroys forests throughout the South by overcutting. This overcutting not only makes their chip mills more productive than those of their competitors, it also makes them the development leader of the timber companies. Their developments throughout the South have ecological and political importance beyond the boundaries of the impacted communities. Wherever and whenever it is most profitable to create a planned unit development, International Paper has done so. As the value of their timber lands as residential land has risen, International Paper has responded by developing and selling the land that they don't clearcut and replant with monoculture pine plantations.

Because they have so much land and money, International Paper is a company with the power to bring thousands of new residents to areas that are historically rural, disrupting communities. They have demonstrated a consistent lack of respect towards neighboring landowners and communities who have no choice but to abide by the development of thousands of acres of land. Small towns with budgets that pale in comparison to International Paper profits cannot stand up to the giant company. International Paper also robs landowners of flexibility by surrounding them with suburban developments over which they have no control. Overcutting and sprawl are destroying Southern forests, and International Paper is one corporation that is actively participating in both.

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