

Upstate Forever

Promoting Sensible Growth and
Protecting Special Places in the Upstate

November 11, 2009

TO: All Members of Greenville County Council
All Members of Greenville County Planning Commission
Joe Kernell, Greenville County Administrator
Mellone Long, Assistant County Administrator for Planning

FROM: Brad Wyche, Upstate Forever

RE: Draft Greenville County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

I am pleased to submit Upstate Forever's comments on the current draft of the comprehensive land use plan.

First, we would like to commend you for your outstanding work in seeking and receiving input from Greenville County residents, including establishing six citizen committees, holding community meetings throughout the county, and conducting a scientific survey of the residents. This survey (with a 4% margin of error) reveals strong support for managing growth and protecting our natural resources. The residents were asked to rank the level of importance of a variety of topics and issues. Here are some of the findings ("VI" means very important, while "SI" means somewhat important):

1. Stronger growth management policies (65% VI, 22% SI)
2. Land use decisions that reduce infrastructure costs (54% VI, 29% SI)
3. Limit growth near sensitive areas (69% VI, 21% SI)
4. Land conservation (63% VI, 25% SI)
5. Clean water (95% VI, 3% SI)
6. Clean air (93% VI, 5% SI)
7. Protect and enhance the character of the county (76% VI, 17% SI).

The recommendations of the citizen committees are consistent with these findings. For example, the Land Use and Transportation Committee asks for "drastic changes in the methods and approaches to land use

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and transportation planning conducted by Greenville County,” while “the fundamental conclusion of the Natural Resources [Committee] is that aggressive measures must be taken to protect the most valuable and vulnerable resources in Greenville County.” *Initial Work, Statements and Findings of the Imagine Greenville Citizen Committees, p. 1.*

Turning to the current draft of the plan, the first three chapters are solid and helpful, presenting basic facts and figures about Greenville County and explaining the public process for revising the plan.

Chapter 4 contains the Future Land Use Map, which provides an exciting blueprint for growth and development in Greenville County over the next ten years. The map shows that most future growth should take place in the center of the county, with the northern and southern areas classified as “rural land use.” This vision is based on three naturally occurring elements of the built environment: Communities, Centers and Corridors. Communities are where most people live and consist of six categories of residential use of various densities, ranging from one unit per ten acres to six or more units per acre. Centers are where most people work and do business and include five categories—Rural, Neighborhood, Community, Regional and Super-Regional. Finally, Corridors refer to the principal roads that link the Communities with the Centers—43 roads are listed in the plan. Upstate Forever supports the Future Land Use Map and the approach based on Communities, Centers, and Corridors.

Chapter 5 identifies three “priority investment areas” of the county where new or expanded infrastructure and services, such as roads, water, and sewer, should be provided in the future. We support this designation because the areas are located in the urban core of the county and concentrating infrastructure and services there will attract revitalization projects and new development. This, in turn, will go a long way toward achieving the vision of the Future Land Use Map. There is no indication, however, that the designation of these areas has any real meaning or enforceability. In fact, the plan refers to the projects in these three areas as merely a “wish list.” We urge you to include language in the final plan that makes it clear that these projects are truly Greenville County’s top priorities.

The greatest weakness of the draft plan is the final chapter. Entitled “Next Steps,” this chapter should be the cornerstone of the plan but it is only three pages long. It does not contain a single recommendation for the new and modified policies that are needed to make the plan a reality.

In her introductory letter, Ms. Long emphasizes the crucial role played by citizens in the plan:

“The goals and objectives in this plan were created by the members of the citizen committees. They attended numerous meetings and completed assignments to increase their knowledge about the various elements of the comprehensive plan. Based on the knowledge they gained and their concern for the future of Greenville County, they identified the most appropriate goals and objectives for the county.”

Yet the more than 60 goals and objectives recommended by the citizen committees are relegated to an appendix to the plan. For each recommendation there are “priority scores” by the County Council, the Planning Commission, and the staff and a timeline that ranges from “ongoing” to 20 years. But nowhere in the plan or in the appendix is there any indication of which, if any, of the recommendations will actually be implemented. The citizen committees deserve better than this—they expected that the goals and objectives to which they devoted so much time and effort would actually be important and meaningful in the final plan and not be simply listed in an appendix.

The Achilles heel of planning in Greenville County (and the entire Upstate) has always been the “I-word”—implementation. We have done a very good job of drafting plans with beautiful maps and all the right words, but we have done a lousy job of making these plans a reality. I will never forget standing next to a developer in Spartanburg as we were both studying the proposed future land use map posted on the wall. He turned to me, with a worried look and asked, “What is this thing?” I explained that it was the proposed land use plan for Spartanburg County, and with a sigh of relief, he said, “Oh good, it’s just a plan.”

Planning is the easy part—the challenge is implementing it. For example, it was easy to draw up a plan for revitalizing downtown Greenville—narrowing Main Street, putting in wide sidewalks, and planting trees. That plan could have gathered dust on a shelf, but city leaders made a commitment to implementation, and we now see and enjoy the spectacular results.

In a memorandum submitted to you on March 4, 2009, Upstate Forever recommended several policies that would enable Greenville County to achieve the goals of the comprehensive plan, such as the 1 to 1 growth ratio, an infrastructure and service boundary, a transfer of development rights program, a county conservation bank, a traditional neighborhood design ordinance, a mandatory open space development

ordinance, and form-based zoning. A copy of our memorandum is enclosed. Some of these policies are mentioned in the appendix, but there is no indication of when, if ever, they will be considered and approved by County Council.

We urge you to draft a list of the specific policies that ***will be adopted*** in order to implement the plan, to establish a clear timetable for doing so (not to exceed one year), and to allow public comment on the list before it is included in the final plan.

This is a critical time in Greenville County's history. Every day our population increases by 14 people, and until the economic crisis, land was being developed at the rate of 16 acres per day. County Council has the opportunity and the authority to establish the policies needed to keep our county from becoming a sprawling mess with exorbitant costs of providing services, severe environmental impacts, a highly diminished quality of life, and an unattractive place for new businesses. Ten years from now, when the next process for revising the comprehensive plan begins, it will be too late.