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Conservation Bank bill may help it survive

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BLUFFTON TODAY COLUMBIA BUREAU

COLUMBIA — The S.C. Conservation Bank would survive past the 2013 cut-off date scheduled in current law, under a bill a House subcommittee approved last week.

Given the subcommittee's passage of the legislation, H. 3083, the bank's executive director, Marvin Davant, said he would not push lawmakers to also approve a bill, H. 3084, aimed at eliminating the so-called "kill switch" in the law. Current law requires that when most state agencies see funding cuts, all of the bank's documentary stamp revenue are seized.

Such has been the case in recent years, but lawmakers nevertheless sent some emergency funds to sustain the bank.

The Bank, created in 2002, works with private landowners and outside groups to purchase easements on select acreage. The land deals ensure the acreage will not be developed, even if property changes hands. The Bank has two staff members and has operated under the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

Davant said the state's quality of life must be preserved alongside its growing population density. "The need to voluntarily conserve our significant land and iconic places that brings these people here in the first place to give them somewhere to go and something to do ... so that they will continue to come here and build businesses is even more important now," he said.

Davant noted that South Carolina ranks 40th in size and yet is 10th in conversion of rural land into urban properties.

Dana Leavitt, the land trust special projects director of Upstate Forever, declared himself a conservative Republican before laying out his support for the Conservation Bank to lawmakers.

"These experiences and destination jewels help ensure our quality of life and our sense of place," he said. "With gas prices what they are today, many people can't afford to go long distances on vacation. So keeping these jewels open to the public is essential to our present and the future quality of life."

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