

Act offers state a chance to not pave paradise

Once, there was a wooded rise of land where, in spring, the branches of the trees were alive with birds and, in autumn, the entire hillside turned bright gold and red.

It's an apartment complex now. Lots of asphalt parking space. Here and there, a few sticks of crape myrtles. Flood lights 24 hours a day.

Once, there was a charming farm with a small pond. Wild ducks lighted on the water.

It's a subdivision now. Rows of spec homes. Miles of paved streets. No wild ducks.

There were not supposed to be 4 million people living in South Carolina until the year 2005. That was the prediction. But we passed 4



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million about two years back.

Every day, on the average, 39 new people move into the Upstate alone. About 16 of those new people move to Greenville County, which now has a population of almost 400,000. More than one million people now live in the Upstate.

The newcomers represent jobs and incomes and economic vitality. The state

welcomes them. But all these new people need places to live. They need places to shop and work and to fill up their cars with gas.

Every day, South Carolina converts an average of about 200 acres of open space to development. That's around 70,000 acres every year.

That's pastureland and woods turning into subdivisions, apartments, convenience stores, highways, parking lots, gas stations, strip malls, motels, office parks. Grass and trees turning into concrete and pavement.

South Carolina has become the 10th most rapidly developing state in the nation.

A study by the Strom Thurmond Institute at

Clemson University offers a picture of what that means. The study found the greater Charleston urbanized area was 70 miles wide in 1973. By the year 2000, the urbanized area was 294 miles wide.

The Upstate loses 33 acres every day to development, says Brad Wyche, of Upstate Forever. Greenville County loses nine acres every day.

And yet, he notes, "Polls show overwhelming public support for open space."

There are ways to grow and still preserve very special green places. One of these is up for debate now in the State House of Representatives. It's called the South Carolina Conservation Bank Act.

The Act would help preserve natural and historic

lands, wildlife habitats, prime farmlands, biologically sensitive areas. Money provided by the act would give the state a chance to buy such properties when they come up for sale. Or to buy conservation easements.

A small portion, 25 cents, of every Real Estate Deed Stamp Fee — the fee to record a deed — would go to the Conservation Bank. The fee is not new. The fee would not increase.

But this would raise \$8 to \$10 million each year to preserve land. And everybody wins. Property owners get paid the value of their land. Sales are entirely voluntary.

And the people of South Carolina get land saved for wildlife and hikers and campers and hunters and

fishers. They get land saved for beauty.

Georgia spends \$30 million each year for that same purpose, Wyche says. Beaufort County has decided to spend \$40 million over the next several years.

Consideration of the Conservation Bank Act has begun in the South Carolina House. Wednesday of next week is expected to be a big day for debate. If you like the idea of the bank, tell your representative.

Keep in the back of your mind that there was once a lovely long stretch of Upstate country road, with woods and rolling pasture along each side: Woodruff Road.

■ Jeanne Brooks' column appears on Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday. She can be reached at (864) 298-4261.