

Tree ordinance debate gets hot

Safety questions latest hurdle

By Sarah G. Bonnette
STAFF WRITER
sbonnett@greenvillenews.com

Growing up in Greenville, local developer Ed Durham remembers nothing more than tar and gravel in parking lots.

"There was no break in the whole parking lot. That's the way you did it back in those days," he said.

Now, some cities and counties across the state are rejecting expanses of asphalt with parking spaces and making developers put in trees and shrubs.

Greenville County has considered landscaping as part of changes to its parking-lot ordinance for more than a year.

The County Council sent those rules back to its Public Service, Planning and Development Committee during the last council meeting, attended by more than 400 people supporting more trees in parking lots.

The committee, which sent the original proposal back to an advisory group of developers and citizens for more work last August, was told to study safety issues for children from putting trees in parking lots.

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GEORGE GARDNER / Staff

Cool spots: Parking spaces reserved for County Council members are shaded by trees. The council sent a parking lot ordinance back to committee to study safety issues.

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"I guess it was just the idea that ... in a wide open parking lot, they can come up between cars, but you don't have this other obstacle or places where they can be," said Councilman Bob Taylor, who made the motion to send the ordinance back to the committee.

"It was just brought up. Somebody just mentioned that they had seen something like this. I have no personal knowledge of it other than that was something that somebody brought up that ought to be looked at," he said.

Diane Eldridge, associate director of Upstate Forever, said she believes the safety concerns are just "a ploy" by County Council, whose reserved parking spaces are next to trees in the County Square parking lot.

"It's curious that they're worried about making private property owners put landscaping in a large parking lot that's going to affect the whole community, but they made a decision to use the taxpayer dollars to landscape that parking lot," Eldridge said.

Taylor said "the county likes trees in parking lots. I didn't pick them. I'm all for people doing it. ... I don't like the idea of dictating. I like to keep government as small as possible. That's basically the bottom line."

Study the issues

Eric Vinson, an associate planner with the Greenville County Planning Commission, said the commission would address council members' concerns when it gets council's directions.

Councilman Mark Kingsbury, who chairs the committee, said safety issues have "got to be studied" and said he would ask planners to look into them once he talks to Taylor.

But Kingsbury said the ordinance probably wouldn't come up before his committee until its second August meeting because of a large number of rezoning cases that must be dealt with during the first meeting.

Kingsbury said the committee will make a recommendation on the safety issues to the full council, which must give the code final approval before it takes effect.

The landscaping requirements would apply to new office, commercial and industrial projects. Lots used for sales and storage, such as auto and boat sales, are exempted from the code.

All new off-street parking lots with 60 or more spaces would be required to have interior planting islands with a minimum planting area of 8 feet by 18 feet. Each planting area would have to contain one tree for every 15 parking spaces and one shrub for every five parking spaces.

Under changes made by County Council earlier this month, half of the required trees must be shade trees that will reach at least 30 feet tall. Original requirements set the number of shade trees at 75 percent.

The use of existing trees is encouraged through development credits. The bigger the tree that's saved, the higher the development credits awarded.

In addition, the code would require off-street parking lots with 10 or more spaces to have roadside buffers with an average of one tree for every 60 linear feet of road frontage.

Developers also are allowed, but not required, to construct 25 percent of the required parking area using grass for office and commercial buildings of more than 60,000 square feet. The aim is to reduce the amount of impervious surface.

Other codes

In developing the code, Vinson said, planners studied landscaping requirements already on the books in Charleston, York, Lexington and Beaufort counties, as well as Mecklenburg, Wake, Durham and Buncombe counties in

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North Carolina and Fulton County in Georgia.

Charleston County requires one canopy tree for each 50 linear feet of parking or loading area and one landscaped island for each 10 spaces, said Dan Pennick, assistant director of its planning agency.

Pennick said in terms of safety, children are less likely to get hit when parking areas are landscaped because "you're breaking up the parking lot.

"When you have a continuous expanse of parking, your speeds are higher," he said, adding that trees slow down drivers.

In Spartanburg, where developers must put in one tree per 12 spaces, the islands in which trees are planted work as traffic control devices, said Bob Klute, the

city's planning manager. Spartanburg County also has a landscaping ordinance that requires one tree for every 20 spaces.

Taylor said claims trees make lots safer "may or may not be."

"I'm still waiting to see if there is anything out there. Somebody will be looking into that," he said.

Most developers in Charleston County have embraced the parking lot requirements because they end up with a more marketable product, Pennick said.

Durham said there are economic benefits to putting trees in large parking lots — not just because they will make the property more valuable and marketable, but also because they help cool those asphalt lots.

During the day, asphalt absorbs heat like a sponge, which it then releases at night. That means temperatures around large parking lots are usually higher, and nearby buildings use more energy for air conditioning, Durham said.

But cooler temperatures are

just one of the benefits of trees, said Greg Lewis, a biology professor at Furman University.

Trees also absorb carbon dioxide from industry and vehicle emissions, Lewis said.

Most importantly, he added, trees can reduce the amount of storm water — rainfall not absorbed into the ground — from parking lots that ends up in local streams and rivers. That storm water often carries motor oil and other chemicals that hurt aquatic life, he said.

Taylor said he would like to give developers incentives to plant trees in parking lots in the county's storm water fee ordinance, which needs final approval from the council.

Businesses and industries will pay stormwater fees based on roof area, parking lots and sidewalks on their property.

Incentives in the storm water fee "would relate to this sort of what they might do in a parking lot. Parking lots obviously are going to generate much higher

fees," Taylor said.

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