

Conservation easement plan unveiled at Reedy River meeting

By Vanita Washington
LAURENS BUREAU

LAURENS – Officials are asking property owners along the Reedy River to allow them to purchase a conservation easement to protect the area bordering the river.

Upstate Forever, Upper Savannah Land Trust and Friends of the Reedy River met in Laurens with property owners to discuss the first part of the Reedy River Restoration Plan. The State of South Carolina Natural Resource Trustees put together the plan as a result of the Colonial Pipeline spill in 1996.

Colonial paid the state \$6.6 million for restoration of the river, and of that \$3 million is set aside for the purchase of conservation easements. The amount of land for the easements would vary from property to property.

"If the property has a large flood plain, the buffer could be quite substantial," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever. "If there's a deep drop to the river, the buffer would be much smaller. The objective is to protect the riparian area."

The plan is to purchase the easements which would put restrictions on the land to try to preserve the character of the river. These restrictions would keep property owners from cutting down trees or building in the riparian zone.

Generally riparian areas are found around rivers and streams. They link water and dry land and assist in protecting the quality of the water. The vegetation acts as a natural filter for runoff of rain water.

But property owners along the river aren't too receptive of the idea.

"I'm an environmentalist, but to me this is a violation of our rights," said Becky Howell who owns more than 30 acres of land with Robert Frady on Dunklin Bridge Road in Greenville County. "It takes your rights away and leaves you with property they control. The property at the river is wild, nothing but woodland and a swampy place and that's the way I want it to stay."

Resident Kevin Boiter said he is concerned about the restrictions.

"I have mixed feelings. It's a good idea, but it's bad to have to rely on people to tell us if we're doing a good job or not," said Boiter who owns a couple hundred acres of land in the Tumblin Shoals community in Laurens County. "Right now the land is just there, but in the future we may want to sell some of the timber."

Barry Beasley, director of planning and research for the state Department of Natural Resources says the program is purely voluntary.

"The decision to participate is up to the landowner," Beasley said. "The typical easement is very flexible based on what the landowner wants and they can reserve the right to cut the timber or build houses, just not in the riparian buffer and that's relatively narrow."

If property owners would like to sell their easement an appraiser would appraise their property and if it's worth \$200,000 and the easement would bring the value down to \$100,000, property owners would be paid the difference or \$100,000, Wyche said.

"It's a win/win situation," he said. "We have this opportunity with the Colonial settlement. Landowners receive tax benefits and possible capital gain and the Reedy is saved."

Beasley said about 200 to 300 residents live along the riparian area and each received notices of the meeting.

"I thought we had a positive discussion to protect the long term health of the Reedy," he said. "The next step is for residents who are interested in the program to contact one of the land trusts to sit down and work out an agreement."

Other meetings will be scheduled in coming months to discuss other portions of the restoration plan.