

# Upstate Forever 'looks at the forest'

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## Group an example of turn toward local environmentalism

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Brad Wyche gets calls every day from people who want help with environmental problems.

He turns many of them away, sadly, he says, but the calls are evidence that the public knows Upstate Forever. Since it began in Wyche's home in 1998, the group has risen to a regional environmental advocacy group with 1,646 members, seven paid staffers and recognition throughout the Southeast.

Like any group promoting change to protect the environment, Upstate Forever is not loved by all, but Wyche said he started the group to spawn public debate as the Upstate began to boom.

"I had a lifelong interest in environmental issues, and there was no organization speaking out on these issues," he said. "We've stepped in and filled the void."

Groups like Upstate Forever are the new wave in environmental activism, said Bob Thomas, director of the Center for Environmental Communications at Loyola University in New Orleans. He said during the 1990s, many local people saw the major national environmental groups getting too big and unresponsive, so they turned local.

Upstate Forever does good work, said Robert G. "Butch" Taylor of the Greenville County Taxpayers Association. He said his criticisms of the group are not necessarily about ideology, but methodology.

"They're not all good, but they're not all bad either," he said. "(Wyche) is not my enemy by any means."

Taylor, who supports private property rights, said he can't support strict zoning and "smart growth"



KEN OSBORN / Staff

**Five years of work:** Brad Wyche, founder of Upstate Forever, and Diane Eldridge, also of the group, look over paperwork.

policies advocated by Upstate Forever, and opposes the group's search for conservation easements.

"We've abused the land, but we don't have to apply these overall blankets," Taylor said.

Other environmental groups are impressed with Upstate Forever's rapid rise. The group is doing important work, said Jill Johnson, Southern field organizer for U.S. PIRG in Atlanta, a nonpartisan public interest group.

"Some environmental groups might have looked at a relatively conservative area such as the Upstate and written it off," Johnson

See **FOREVER** on page 5B

## Upstate Forever turns five

In five years, Upstate Forever has grown from a single person running a home office to a regional environmental organization with political weight. A brief look at some critical moments for the group:

- **Late 1998:** Upstate Forever formed
- **March 1999:** Moved to West End offices
- **June 1999:** First member joins
- **June 2000:** Hwy. 295 connector defeated
- **Nov. 2000:** Receives first conservation easement, holds conference on easements
- **Feb. 2001:** Membership reaches 1,000
- **May 2001:** Holds conference on green development
- **July 2001:** School District approves "green schools" initiative
- **May 2002:** Holds conference on zoning
- **Sept. 2002:** County Council approves parking lot landscaping ordinance
- **Nov. 2002:** "Penny for Parks," Laurens zoning defeated
- **March 2003:** Receives \$1.5 million to study Saluda River watershed
- **Oct. 2003:** State acquires Poinsett Bridge
- **Dec. 2003:** Marks fifth anniversary and tallies 1,646 members

\* Projects the group actively supported  
Brad Wyche, Executive Director



# FOREVER

FROM PAGE 1B

said. "But I think they have been extremely smart and strategic in choosing to tackle issues that everyone can relate to, like sensible growth."

Thomas said conservative areas sometimes are strong supporters of localized environmental advocacy.

"Just because it is a conservative area doesn't mean people don't care about environmental issues," he said. "They don't want Washington solving their problems."

In its first five years, Upstate Forever has tried to focus the area's attention on smart and sustainable growth policies, an idea roundly criticized by many conservatives and property-rights advocates.

Supporters, such as Dell Isham, director of the South Carolina Sierra Club, say many of the problems the Upstate faces fall under the umbrella of restraining growth: ozone pollution, loss of farmland and wild areas, flooding and too few parks, among others.

"I wish there was an organization like that for every region of

the state," Isham said. "A lot of times, environmentalists look at the trees instead of the forest. Upstate Forever is looking at the forest."

Upstate Forever has scored some important environmental victories. It was a force behind the commercial parking lot landscaping ordinance that was approved by the Greenville County Council in 2002. The group also fought and helped kill the State 295 connector through the Tyger River watershed in Spartanburg. It helped kill the Spartanburg County regional landfill this fall. Wyche served as part of a group that finally preserved the Poinsett Bridge in northern Greenville County and forced the Greenville County school district to use green school technologies to save energy and save money.

But with success came setbacks, like the overwhelming defeats in the "penny for parks" referendum in Greenville County and the countywide zoning referendum in Laurens County. The parks went down by 17,000 votes and the zoning lost by 20 percentage points.

"They were ambitious goals but they're not total losses," Wyche said. "There's education in the debate."

Wyche and Upstate Forever

plan to continue blasting away at the issues they feel are important, such as expanding its land trust, which already holds more than 3,000 acres in conservation easements. The group is talking with owners of another 15,000 acres of land. Wyche also wants to nearly triple his membership to 5,000 and raise an endowment to take the pressure off of fundraising.

That will give Wyche time to educate and advocate.

"This is such a critical window of opportunity," he said. "Are we going to go down the path Atlanta took 20 or 25 years ago?"

Thomas said local environmental groups that are well-run, don't intentionally stir up the community and can connect with the population will push the environmental movement through the 21st century.

"If you go back 75 years, this is where the Sierra Club and Audubon were," Thomas said.