

By Heidi Coryell Williams

Just beyond a guardrail and behind the thick treeline that stretches alongside State 11 in Pickens County, lies a sliver of something most people miss amid the miles of pavement and looming mountain vistas that span this scenic highway.

With only a few short steps, this hidden highway pulloff becomes a forested but gentle embankment at the base of which runs the little Eastatoe River, swollen with the rainwater from recent days.

One day, the area will be a roadside park, one of several sightseeing stops along State 11, also called the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Byway.

"That's what Highway 11 is all about," said Grant Cunningham, an associate professor of city and regional planning at Clemson University. "It's about allowing the driver to enjoy the vistas."

Stop-off sites such as the planned park are opportunities for people "to experience the natural beauty of the Upstate," he said.

But as it stands today, the entrance to this natural resource is as easy to miss as it is deceptively barren offering little more than a dirt lot littered with Styrofoam boxes and plastic bags.

Planners, politicians and property owners in the Scenic Highway 11 area say their community and the scenic corridor that carries visitors and residents in and out of it is standing on the cusp of certain change.

Their challenge, they say, is one shared by rural communities across the country, in making sure that as the area changes and grows the corridor remains protected.

With no public water or sewer service in the Pickens County section of State 11, there's little reason for concern about commercial development cropping up nearby any time soon.

"Right now it's not threatened. There's no crisis. There's no impending doom," said DeWitt Stone, chairman of the Pickens County planning commission.

But he and others say that doesn't make State 11 safe from change, which is why they're working to stay ahead of any growth.

"As the population increases in this area, it will become a tourist destination," Stone said. "It's not a Gatlinburg. It's not a Pigeon Forge. But I think that's what people are thinking."

And they're thinking it's something they don't want.

Vistas worth viewing

The future roadside park is located just a few miles from the home and business of Sharon Mahanes. The pulloff will be called the Long Shoals Wayside Park and will count chemical toilets, picnic tables and a stocked trout fishing area among its offerings.

The spot is a single jewel in what Mahanes describes as the treasure trove of natural beauty that spans this historic corridor.

She and her husband, Jim, run the Schell Haus Bed and Breakfast, an overnight retreat for hikers and city slickers alike who come to see nearby Table Rock State Park.

As president of the Andrew Pickens Chapter of the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Byway Association, Mahanes is but one of its many protectors. The beautification and conservation group was started in Greenville County, and its members work to secure state and federal grants that promote the beautification of the 117-mile road, which runs from Gaffney to Interstate 85 in Oconee County.

The wayside park will turn the littered spot, ravaged by four-wheel vehicles, into a protected, but visitor-friendly stopping point.

As time passes and the number of cars traveling the road grows, more guardians will be needed, Mahanes says more people watching for signs of encroaching development, like billboard signs or the roadside gift shops that often accompany even the most well-intentioned tourist attractions.

According to state Department of Transportation figures, traffic along State 11 has grown significantly in the past five years.

While Greenville County daily traffic counts have risen only about 8 percent since 1998, or 175 cars per day, Pickens County has seen its traffic counts increase by more than 25 percent, an average of 470 cars per day.

"The vistas," Mahanes explained recently during a break from her Christmas decorating, "are very important."

"I wouldn't want to see that lost to development."

Planning for protection

At a meeting Monday night, the Pickens County Planning Commission was asked to form a community task force to study best uses for the Highway 11 land. The request to form the group is a final directive from outgoing county council member Jimmy Patten, who lives in and represents the State 11 community.

"The people that live up there love the beauty of that highway," Patten said. "It's no kind of land ordinance. It's got nothing to do with that. It's to look at keeping it a rustic setting — scenic beauty, instead of something modern coming in."

A more aggressive effort is expected to get under way in Greenville County next year, said Brad Wyche, executive director of **Upstate Forever**, a grassroots group working to protect natural and historical parts of the upstate.

His organization is working to start a pilot program and task force next year that would encourage developers to buy property rights along the State 11 and agree to conservation easements on that land. In return, those landowners would receive less restrictive development rights elsewhere in the county, such as in the area around the International Center for Automotive Research (ICAR) park.

The transfer of development rights program already is working in 150 communities around the country, and it could work on State 11, Wyche said.

To date, only one conservation easement exists along the highway, he said. The parcel, located in Greenville County, includes about 27 acres or 2,000 feet of road frontage and is located near Old State 11 and the Pickens County line.

"There's a perception that it has been protected and it will always remain a scenic highway, but that highway is in serious jeopardy," Wyche said. "The scenic highway designation provides some (guidelines) on signs and billboards, but there's no other measure in place right now to protect the highway."

Responsible development

Ken Horbinski lives four-tenths of a mile off Highway 11.

Like everyone else who lives in this part of Pickens County, his water comes from a well; his sewer service is provided by a septic system. The closest place to do any grocery shopping is Six Mile or Pickens, both of which are about a half hour's drive away.

About a decade ago when Horbinski moved to the area, there were 15 other homes in his subdivision. Now, his neighbors number more than 40, and he expects the remaining six lots will be snatched up sometime soon.

While many are reluctant to even utter words like "planning" or "zoning," with regard to the State 11 area, as the owner of Table Rock Realty, Horbinski is among those that believe the area could benefit from more restrictive land use rules.

"Zoning would curtail someone from doing a junkyard," he explained.

That's something that he believes would make his clients more comfortable in the long run. Many of the high-end buyers who build in the area do so to be near the thousands of acres of protected forestland.

"They come here to get away," he said.
