

Community

Tapping into the line

Water service becomes growth issue

BY GARY HYNDMAN
staff writer

The trail of new vinyl-sided residential subdivisions continues to creep along Fairview Road south of Simpsonville.

With each new addition, Greenville County's plan to preserve the area's rural character appears more vulnerable to urban sprawl.

Development is being driven to the south by rapid growth, a geological fluke and public policy decisions with possible unintended consequences.

Jimmy Forbes, executive director of the Greenville County Planning Commission, said the county is under pressure because it's projected to grow by 150,000 people by 2030.

"The question is: Where do you put them?" he asked.

The influx of people is applying unprecedented pressure on public infrastructure that includes roads, schools and utilities.

Greenville County Council recently approved a \$126,000 grant to provide water lines for six rural homes and other vacant parcels on McKittrick Bridge Road Extension and Hillside Church Road south of Fountain Inn. The 7,200-foot extension to the Greenville Water System is contingent on residents raising a matching amount to cover the balance of the \$252,000 project.

It's part of the \$1 million Water Line Installation Grant Program established in 2003 by County Council. The program is designed to help residents with contaminated or dry wells as well as addressing safety issues related to fire service, said County Council member Eric Bedingfield.

Applications are scored by a committee of public works staff based on criteria that includes health and safety, fire protection, the number of citizens to benefit, their ability to secure finances and the project's scope.

Bedingfield made water service a campaign issue in 2002 and was instrumental in the program's creation. He said he was motivated by concern for residents who have lost their water supply.

"I felt like the county should participate in this burden of protecting our citizens," he said.

Thus far, one small \$50,000 project on Hillside Church Road has been completed, Bedingfield said. That's because residents have no source for matching their grants.

"That's a huge snag," he said.

He and other council members have asked the county's Washington lobbyist to pursue federal grants to make up the difference. One possibility is the popular Community Development Block Grants the city of Greenville and Greenville County Redevelopment Authority have used successfully for years.

If such funding can be secured, five approved projects valued at nearly \$1.2 million can go forward, including the one on McKit-

trick Bridge Road Extension.

That would be fine with Watson Curry, one of the McKittrick Road homeowners.

Curry and his wife Joyce grew up nearby just a few miles from each other. After years of living in suburban Mauldin and Simpsonville, the retired couple purchased 50 acres a quarter of a mile from the Laurens County line where they built a 2,300-square-foot house in 1997.

It's exactly the privacy they prefer. Their property features pastoral splendor, complete with rolling hillsides, their four horses and no other sign of civilization.

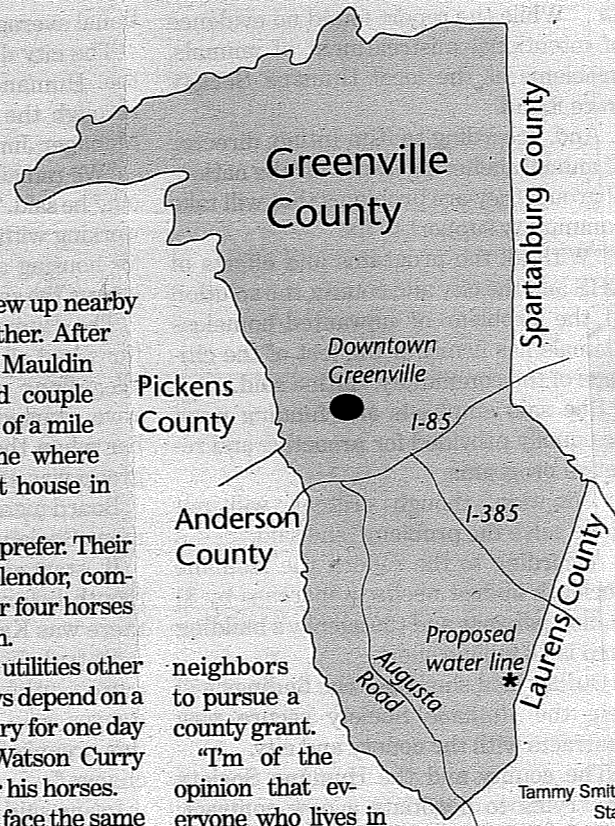
But there are also no public utilities other than electric power. The Currys depend on a well for water. The well went dry for one day during the recent drought. Watson Curry was forced to haul in water for his horses.

Today, he and his neighbors face the same predicament. Should their wells go permanently dry, they can't drill them deeper because uranium is buried in the rock shelf below, he said.

And there is also no guarantee that additional drilling will produce results. A neighbor, Eddie Jones, spent more than \$10,000 drilling a 600-foot well, Curry said.

"He had no more water then than he had before," he said.

It was the threat of losing their water supply that prompted Curry, Jones and their



neighbors to pursue a county grant.

"I'm of the opinion that everyone who lives in Greenville County should have the option of city water," he said.

Public water wasn't a possibility in Curry's part of the county until it was discovered some area residents had uranium-tainted wells. A collaboration of federal, state and county governments, along with the Greenville Water System, paid for a water line extension to serve those residents.

If funding is found for their matching grant, the Currys and their neighbors will be able to tap onto that same extension.

But their property is part of an area designated rural preservation in Designing Our Destiny, the county's comprehensive land use plan approved by County Council in 1999. The plan, which included input from local governments, public utilities and citizens, was created to guide the county's growth.

The Greenville County Planning Commission published a report about the plan indicating many citizens who responded wanted the county to preserve rural land and manage growth.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, a local nonprofit organization that advocates sensible growth, said supplying public utilities to rural preservation areas contradicts that plan and encourages sprawl.

"What drives development is infrastructure and services," he said.

Curry said the land across the street from his home has been purchased by a developer who is selling tracts to build homes. And because the land is not zoned, there are no restrictions on how large the lots must be. That means the Currys may one day find themselves living in another suburban

neighborhood.

Bedingfield said the water installation program includes a provision to prevent developers from capitalizing on new public infrastructure. It calls for developers to reimburse the county an amortized portion of the public cost of installation when they build in an area where water service has been established through the program.

But Wyche believes the county's scoring system for grants should include an evaluation of a project's consistency with its land use plan.

He said Upstate Forever backed a failed initiative to include service boundaries in the land use plan. It proposed steering growth to the middle 300,000 acres of the county that is more heavily populated and served by public infrastructure.

Similar policies have been adopted in communities such as Portland, Ore. and Lexington, Ky. where taxpayers have chosen to actively manage growth, he said. Property owners outside those service boundaries aren't served by public utilities.

Contact Gary Hyndman at 679-1226 or ghyndman@greenvillejournal.com.

Greenville County Water Line Installation Grant Program

Project	Total Cost	County's Portion
South Greenville Fire District	\$788,000	\$394,000
Randall Drive	\$62,500	\$31,250
Valley Road	\$14,300	\$7,150
River Falls Fire Department	\$80,400	\$40,200
McKittrick Bridge Road Extension	\$252,000	\$126,000