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The biggest environmental enemy? Us.

DAVID LAUDERDALE, *Packet columnist*

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GREENVILLE -- Honk if you don't want to become another Atlanta.

Or better yet, get involved.

South Carolina's greatest environmental enemy is -- us. It's people. People, people and more people.

The population increase has gone from a crawl to a sprint in recent years. Clemson University says nearly 1 million new residents will move here in the next 20 years. And we won't be adding a single acre to accommodate them.

Growth is THE issue of our time, leaders of four South Carolina environmental watchdog groups told a national conference on the environment this week at Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership.

Clemson World online has a nice title on a story about how Clemson is helping local governments quantify the true cost of growth: "More smiling faces, fewer beautiful places?"

Vast areas in the state don't even have local zoning. Some counties have progressed to land-use master plans -- but the plans are worthless because there is no money or ordinances to bring them to life.

"Every day in the Upstate, 33 acres of open space -- forests, natural areas, wildlife habitat, pastures, farm-land, and green fields -- are devoured by the voracious growth machine," says Upstate Forever executive director Brad Wyche of Greenville. "It is a staggering rate -- about four times the rate of our region's population growth, the equivalent of a brand new version of Greenville's Hay-wood Mall every three days."

After a panel discussion moderated by ETV star Rudy Mancke, somebody asked, "At what point can we say we're saturated, that we cannot sustain the growth?"

Dana Beach, executive director of the Coastal Conservation League, said that's a good question, but it doesn't matter. Population growth will not and cannot be stopped. So the real question is how we grow and where we grow.

Angela Viney, president and CEO of the S.C. Wildlife Federation, said, "Wasteful land use is the problem."

Beach said, "We are being marched upon by sprawl."

The Charleston-based organization he founded in 1989 has worked with Clemson to put all this growth in perspective -- and show where we're headed. The numbers are staggering.

They found land consumption growing at six times the rate of population growth. Population growth was at 45 percent, with land consumption growth at 250 percent.

It took two centuries for the total urban area of Charleston and environs to cover 45,000 acres. That was in 1973. In just two decades, that had soared to 160,000 acres. If nothing changes, that will be 555,520 acres by 2030 -- with pavement sprawling all the way to Interstate 95.

Clemson put together a map showing in bright colors what it looks like when the lush Lowcountry landscape is gobbled up like that.

Beach said that image has done more than anything else to wake up the public when The Post & Courier splashed it across the front page.

"No one wanted to see this future," he said.

Communities need better zoning and growth-control ordinances. Planning must be regional. We must stop all the back-breaking annexations. And when regulations are on the books, they need to be enforced.

Nobody can afford the roads, schools and parks that growth is demanding. And it's costly in other ways. The culture of South Carolina is being sacrificed.

Regulation is only part of the solution.

We need to plan ahead to place schools, roads, utilities and parks in logical places -- before the crisis occurs.

Public funding for land acquisition and conservation is imperative. (Please vote "yes" on Beaufort County's land-acquisition referendum on Nov. 7.)

Private land conservation is another important tool.

And so is citizen activism.

Ann Timberlake, executive director of the bipartisan Conservation Voters of South Carolina, said elected leaders who don't want South Carolina to become another Atlanta are in the minority. Her organization is educating voters and trying to hold elected officials accountable. It is a new way for citizens to have a stronger voice.

We must work together.

"Conservation in South Carolina, when it has been successful, has been collaborative," Beach said.

If you don't want to become another Atlanta, vote, write checks, volunteer, run for office, speak out, get educated, demand change, support public-land acquisition, pay attention.

It beats sitting in traffic, honking.

ON THE WEB

- www.strom.clemson.edu/teams/dctech/urban.html
- coastalconservationleague.org
- www.upstateforever.org
- www.scwf.org
- www.conservationvotersofsc.org
- www.furman.edu/riley/

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