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Citizens start at ground level to protect the Earth

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Afocused Boots Plyler, citizen lobbyist, leafs through her briefing papers.

This is late Tuesday morning. She rode from Greenville to Columbia in a two-van caravan. Four other members of the ad hoc team drove down from Spartanburg.

They are 21 in all and now temporarily ensconced, not in the plush office surroundings of successful paid lobbyists, but in the basement dining room of The Immaculate Consumption, a coffee house/cafe not a block from the Statehouse.

The ceiling, painted dark and decorated with woven coffee sacks, creaks from customers walking around upstairs.

**Advertisement** Plyler's group -- some staff of the land-use organization Upstate Forever ([www.upstateforever.org](http://www.upstateforever.org)), the rest Upstate Forever members who volunteered -- are getting ready to try to see their elected representatives and talk about key conservation issues.

This is a strategy devised by Conservation Voters of South Carolina ([www.conservationvotersofsc.org](http://www.conservationvotersofsc.org)) to offset a chronic disadvantage many cash-strapped nonprofits feel they're up against in the legislative arena: not enough money to hire flotillas of high-priced lobbyists.

Over the several critical weeks that the Legislature puts together a state budget, various conservation groups are taking turns reminding legislators of the importance of things like the Conservation Bank. Each Tuesday has become a conservation lobbying day.

Feb.13: Upstate Forever's turn. Theirs is the largest contingent so far. Wildlife Action also has two on this particular lobbyists-for-a-day team.

Plyler, a homemaker, not quite 5 feet 4 inches tall, curly auburn hair, has lived on five acres just outside Greenville since 1976.

"It was mainly small farms when I moved there," she says. Now, "we're five acres with houses all around us."

She hikes and sees less and less open space each year. Last year, she joined Upstate Forever.

Plyler plans to talk about protecting open space.

The lobby between the House and the Senate is an eye-opener, ornate and formal, high-ceilinged. And jam-packed with people in suits -- mostly men -- talking on cell phones and consulting Blackberries. Decibel and energy levels are significant.

As she was told to do, Plyler fills out a form and hands it to a receptionist to let Rep. Dwight Loftis know she's in the lobby. Then she waits behind the blue velvet rope.

People come and go from the House floor. Eventually, Plyler spots Loftis in conversation with someone near the door. She goes over and stands.

When the time comes, she shakes Loftis' hand, introduces herself, asks him to support the Conservation Bank.

Later, Plyler will speak with Sen. Mike Fair at some length.

And after lunch, she will leave notes at the offices of four different elected representatives, asking for their support

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of the Conservation Bank for the sake of her grandchildren.

Before climbing into the van for home, Plyler says, "I feel like I accomplished something. Yes. My voice was heard, no matter how briefly."

And she intends to follow up with e-mails.

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