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Article published Jun 24, 2007

Wanted: Urban planners

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While design trends such as traditional neighborhood development and the "new urbanism" are grabbing hold in other parts of the country, Spartanburg County continues to lag in thoughtful residential planning, says Upstate Forever Program Manager Emily Neely.

"There are trends happening in other places that we'd like to see more of in Spartanburg," Neely said.

Those trends often require knowledgeable urban designers, "but with residential (developments in Spartanburg) especially," Neely said, "it's not the norm to hire (an urban designer) for a site plan."

Area developer and architect Mike Henthorn said it's usually the civil engineer of a residential development who does the designing in Spartanburg County, if it's anyone. It simply costs more to try to "design" an environment, he said, rather than build a bunch of houses.

Planting the seeds

Hoping to encourage better planning at the beginning stage of a residential project - and to plant the seeds for varied design themes to counter conventional subdivisions - Spartanburg County and Upstate Forever have partnered with local architecture firm McMillan Smith & Partners to offer free optional design consultations to area developers.

Assistant County Administrator Chris Story said developers had come to the county in recent months who were interested in more innovative design concepts, but did not necessarily have the background or resources to use as a starting point. Those concepts are commonplace in other communities in the Southeast - Atlanta, Charlotte, N.C., and even Greenville, for example - but not yet in Spartanburg, Story said.

Henthorn, a proponent of traditional neighborhood development, agreed, saying the closest example of that concept to Spartanburg is Baxter Village in Fort Mill, where, according to the development's Web site, "there is a community spirit where sidewalks and front porches frame the streets and the entire neighborhood is your home."

Baxter and developments like it utilize pre-World War II design principles that call for smaller lots arranged on a grid so there is more than one way to enter and exit a neighborhood. Employment, shopping

and entertainment elements are often built within walking distance of the neighborhood to promote the well-being of pedestrians and less reliance on vehicles - think an updated Converse Heights.

It's part of the larger philosophy of "new urbanism," where the priority is creating a sense of "place" through higher-density housing and less segregation between people's homes and all the other elements - work, shopping and school - that dominate their lives.

One important component is the transformation of streets into public amenities where the pedestrian is valued over the car.

"None of the developments (in Spartanburg) are anywhere close to new urbanism," Henthorn said.

The idea for offering free design consultations came about earlier this year. Other architectural firms have expressed interest in donating their services as well, Story said, and they hope to soon start referring developers to the program.

For now, the program will be targeted to those building in unincorporated parts of the county, but "We'd love to be able to offer this as a service to developers in the city (of Spartanburg), too," Neely said.

"I'm not sure how well it will be received," Henthorn said, adding that developers everywhere are driven by what the market demands, not philosophical design principles. Spartanburg might not yet have the population density needed to make a traditional neighborhood development work, nor the inclination to buy into different ways of living.

Aaron Ryba, lead designer for McMillan Smith & Partners, said Spartanburg is making headway when it comes to different design concepts, but mostly in the urban core, or downtown, not in the county.

"We want to jumpstart the process in areas outside the urban core," Ryba said. "There's always a transition period. You have to start somewhere and help people become aware of new ways."

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