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AUGUST 1, 2007

Paving Over the Foothills
Cherished landmarks threatened by development, poor planning

BY [GARY HYNDMAN](#)

It was the day businessman Eddie Martin morphed into a conservationist.

Four years ago, the Walhalla feed and seed store owner was returning home from an out of town trip. Turning off Highway 11 onto a familiar timber road, he discovered the footprint for yet another new Cliffs' residential community.

"It was just road after road cut into the land," he said. "And I thought this is just not right."

As a result, Martin, his wife, and a friend founded Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the rural character of their county.

Martin and other local residents are leading the charge to protect nearby Stumphouse Mountain from private development. Their well-publicized campaign is the latest in a series of Upstate skirmishes pitting citizens against developers. The spoils are the future of the South Carolina foothills.

And while the citizens may win the battle for Stumphouse Mountain, they could very well end up losing the war.

"Unless we change our policies, Highway 11 will be another Woodruff Road in the next 10 to 15 years," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, a regional nonprofit organization that promotes "sensible growth."

Wyche is referring to the Greenville County retail artery infamous as a primer on poor planning. Choked with traffic, overrun by retail establishments and deprived of a grid of side streets to siphon off vehicles, projections are that Woodruff Road will soon outgrow its recent multi-million dollar widening.



Issaqueena Falls
 Photo Bill Robertson, www.brphoto.net

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Hard to believe that as recently as 30 years ago Woodruff Road was a rural - and quiet - two-lane state road. But that was before developers arrived and began transforming its pasture land and orchards into exuberant, asphalt-happy sprawl.

Conservationists like Wyche are worried the same fate awaits Highway 11.

Designated as The Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway, it tracks 130 miles along the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains from Fair Play at the Georgia border north to Gaffney. It's one of 126 routes that comprise The National Scenic Byways Program, a grassroots effort to treasure and protect roads known for their beauty and historic significance.

Highway 11 is dotted by small towns, historic sites, public parks, orchards, family farms, mom and pop shops and unobstructed mountain views. About the only things you won't find, with the exception of the Cherokee County portion, is major development and billboards.

But entrepreneurs - including Jim Anthony of The Cliffs - are parlaying the corridor's pristine setting and relatively affordable real estate into high-end, gated residential communities with championship golf courses as their centerpiece.

The Cliffs now features five separate developments, most of them situated at or near Highway 11. And wherever homes collect, the Golden Arches are sure to follow. Joe Dill, who represents the northern part of the county on Greenville County Council, said he's heard rumors of grocery store chains scouting sites on Highway 11.

"I'm concerned about development that takes away from the beauty of Highway 11," he said.

Representatives of The Cliffs could not be reached for comment.

Developers also staked a claim on Lake Robinson north of Greer where thousands of new homes have been constructed.

Dill said these new housing developments are good for property values but come with their own set of liabilities - additional demand for fire, law enforcement and EMS coverage as well as traffic snarls and accidents on rural state roads not designed for suburban density.

Wyche is frustrated with a lack of political will that, he says, often falls short of public expectation rural land will be protected.

"This is our great failing not just in Greenville but throughout the Upstate. It's the 'I' word," he said. "We don't implement the plan. We have great plans on the books but we don't implement."

Specifically, he's speaking of Greenville County's comprehensive land use plan unanimously adopted by County Council years ago. It calls for land north of Marietta and south of the Southern Connector to be preserved in its present rural state.

The plan's goal was to encourage growth in the center of the county as a way to maximize limited public resources. But as water and sewer lines continue creep beyond those boundaries to provide new service to residential outposts, taxpayers get stuck with the tab.

Studies conducted by American Farmland Trust since the mid-1980s have

consistently found that new residential development is a net public loser. For every dollar of revenue generated, taxpayers incur \$1.19 in costs for new services. Farmland, on the other hand, only costs 39 cents for every dollar of revenue generated.

Still, elected officials can't seem to resist the temptation of new sources of supposed revenue.

That was true in Walhalla, the Oconee County town situated along the Highway 11 corridor. The quaint community of 3,800 north of Clemson was once populated by Cherokees and today is home to descendants of German immigrants.

Walhalla has been forsaken by the textile industry on which it once depended for jobs. The vacant shops along its Main Street speak to a local economy still grieving the betrayal.

When the Walhalla City Council was approached by Atlanta developer Jordan, Jones and Goulding to purchase 440 acres of city-owned property at Stumphouse Mountain to accommodate 200 new luxury homes, they eagerly bit.

City Council approved an ordinance to negotiate a deal with the developer and called a public hearing mainly to fulfill a legal requirement.

Yet as the town's elected officials were about to discover, public affection for the mountain runs deep. It's the site of a Cherokee burial ground, tourist attractions that include picturesque Issaqueena Falls and historic Stumphouse Tunnel, gorgeous views and a rare, state-managed youth hunting area. It also once served as the city's watershed.

Martin was typical of the citizens who packed council chambers the night of the hearing. The Walhalla native, who has hiked Stumphouse Mountain with his family on many occasions, was angry the property was about to be sold off. But he was equally miffed he knew nothing about it.

He was among those who lingered on City Hall grounds after the hearing. With the support of conservation groups, residents began to organize a "Save Stumphouse" campaign that night.

They collected more than 2,000 petition signatures, turned out at every subsequent public meeting armed with protest signs, spoke against the sale and managed to pull off an eleventh hour rescue of their beloved natural resource.

The developer soon backed away from the deal. And City Council is now negotiating a conservation easement on the property that would be held by Upstate Forever. It's expected to be approved at final reading on Aug. 14.

Last month the South Carolina Conservation Bank approved \$1.2 million to compensate the city of Walhalla for the easement that will protect the mountain from future development.

Adjacent private property owners have agreed to sell an additional 511 acres to The Nature Conservancy that will be preserved as a public trust.

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources has committed \$1.5 million toward the purchase price and private grants and gifts are being sought to make up the balance.

With the contract on the property set to expire Aug. 29, \$700,000 was still needed at the time of publication.

Kristen Austin, S.C. Southern Blue Ridge Project director for The Nature Conservancy, said "Save Stumphouse" has called public attention to the conservation movement. "This has been extraordinary," she said. "And the outpouring of generosity has been overwhelming."

Gifts range from \$1 each given by two elderly sisters living in a nursing home to a challenge by which an anonymous person will donate \$300,000 if the Nature Conservancy can raise double that amount in other donations. The community is also hosting a public concert on Aug. 18, with proceeds going to the project.

While Wyche is appreciative of the support, he said it's typical of many conservation efforts. "Unfortunately," he said, "it often takes a crisis to energize the public."

Meanwhile, the threat of private development of rural land goes on unchecked. A Strom Thurmond Institute study found that Upstate real estate was being developed at a rate of 58 acres per day from 1985 to 2000. Wyche said that rate has likely accelerated, though more current data is not yet available.

For every Jocassee Gorges - 43,500 acres of prime foothills property held in public trust and Clemson Experimental Forest - the rumored sale of some of this property drew more than 1,000 people to Clemson's Brooks Center for a town meeting - dozens of acres of undeveloped land is being quietly carved up into golf courses, subdivisions, billboards and fast food restaurants each day.

Zoning could help protect rural property. Yet, ironically, the practice faces some of its stiffest opposition from property rights activists in areas where the absence of zoning puts land at risk of unwanted development.

Conservationists have turned, instead, to more palatable strategies such as conservation easements and transfer of development rights.

But in the great land rush, the advantage appears to remain squarely on the side of developers, who generally can count on the deep pockets of their lenders and investors. The Cliffs Web site says the company has invested more than \$150 million in amenities for its residents.

In comparison, the South Carolina Conservation Bank was allocated just \$25 million in state funds this year to purchase and preserve public land statewide. In addition, the application process is time consuming, its outcome uncertain and with real estate appreciating across the state, funds don't go far.

Austin said Stumphouse Mountain has also exposed the threat from out-of-state developers who have picked up the pleasant Upstate scent, with its reputation for good quality of life and cheap real estate.

"This isn't something Upstate Forever is writing in their literature," she said. "This is reality."

For Martin, who enjoys camping, whitewater kayaking and hunting, the threat is clear.

"Every time you turn the corner, there's a new development popping up somewhere," he said. "It's a monstrous battle we fight."

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