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Grow with character, expert urges county

McMahon: Develop and build, but don't destroy things you love

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Sustainable development expert Ed McMahon addressed the challenge of preserving local character in Spartanburg during economic growth to an audience of about 160 people Friday morning.

The lecture was the second in a six-part series titled "Building Our Future," hosted by Upstate Forever, Partners for Active Living and the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce and designed to help raise awareness of issues surrounding sustainable development.

McMahon is a senior resident fellow for sustainable development at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., and a nationally renowned authority on sustainable development, land conservation and urban design. Sustainable development means balancing the needs of societal growth with protecting natural resources so that growth can be supported.

"The question to think about is if you want new development to shape the character of Spartanburg or if you want Spartanburg to shape the character of the new development," McMahon said. "Growth is inevitable and desirable, and you can grow without destroying the things you love."

McMahon gave examples of how maintaining a sense of place is a key component of growth.

"The image a community presents is fundamentally important to economic well-being," McMahon said.

"This is a community in transition. Spartanburg is on the cusp of a lot of added growth and has a choice to

make about how that growth will be shaped."

McMahon said people should demand that industries and retailers coming into the community build and develop in a way that fits in with the surroundings. He showed pictures of retail businesses around the nation that typically build unattractive, box-like structures but have modified their designs when the communities insisted.

"One of the biggest things about the South is they have a fear of saying no to anything," McMahon said. "You have to expect better."

McMahon said good things already are happening in Spartanburg.

"The county is thinking about land-use planning, and you have great projects like the Foothills Parkway and Palmetto Trail," McMahon said. "But there are also a lot of ugly strip developments and ugly billboards."

Chris Story, an assistant county administrator for Spartanburg County, praised McMahon's presentation.

"There is a significant increase in interest in the issue discussed and the choices Spartanburg can make to address concerns about character," Story said. "The most compelling is the conceptual framework with which a community can approach growth and deciding if it wants to be a world-class community."

Story said County Council is becoming increasingly aware of the connection between economic prospects and community character.

"Community character is an economic development issue," Story said.

Upstate Forever spokeswoman Emily Neely said the event had one of the largest turnouts she has seen.

"It was great having Ed McMahon here because he has so much experience and has seen so many communities nationwide," she said. "He has very persuasive arguments and has given us a lot of food for thought about growth in Spartanburg."

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