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Tree ordinance needed in Greenville

The 'green' in Greenville is experiencing a mind-boggling loss of its tree cover

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By Brad Wyche

Greenville County is experiencing a mind-boggling loss of its tree cover. According to a recent study by the Strom Thurmond Institute at Clemson University, 80,000 acres of trees were leveled in just 15 years (the entire county is 510,000 acres), and the loss continues at the rate of over 14 acres per day.

People are upset about it. Every day you hear the complaints and read the letters, protesting the sudden and dramatic alteration of the landscape. Almost overnight beautiful green spaces are being turned into repulsive expanses of red clay. The standard grading practice in Greenville County (and our entire region) continues to be the complete obliteration of every green thing from a site. If we are lucky, maybe a few saplings will be planted after the buildings are in place.

In response to the public outcry, about two years ago Greenville County Council appointed a Tree Advisory Committee to study the problem and make recommendations. It is a broad-based and well-balanced committee that includes homebuilders, developers, real estate agents, landscape architects, planners, foresters, conservationists and concerned citizens.

The committee worked hard, obtaining advice from experts and hosting meetings throughout the county to hear from the public. In February of this year, it presented its report and recommendations to County Council. The report describes the vast array of public benefits of trees, such as increased property values, improved air and water quality, and reduced erosion and flooding, and then recommends the enactment of a comprehensive tree ordinance for Greenville County. Notably, every member of the committee approved this recommendation, including the builders and developers.

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Relying on the report, county staff has drafted an actual ordinance. (The draft is posted on the Upstate Forever Web site, www.upstateforever.org/prog_tree/0708CCTreeOrdinanceDraft.pdf). The basic policy is to require a minimum "tree density" for all new development projects in the county.

For example, for a new residential subdivision, the requirement is 10 "density units per acre." The specific number of units depends on the size of the tree and whether it is an existing or planted one. The developer is given considerable discretion and flexibility in achieving the density units. There is not even a requirement to preserve existing trees except for very large ones (called "historic" and "specimen" trees in the ordinance), but even these can be removed if the developer shows it is not feasible to save them.

Upstate Forever has submitted extensive comments on the draft ordinance (also available on our Web site). We agree with the basic "tree density" policy, but several provisions in the draft need to be strengthened and clarified.

Not surprisingly, there are some opponents to the ordinance. Using the strategy of "not letting the facts get in the way of a good argument," they assert that if the ordinance is passed, there will be "tree police" keeping people from cutting or trimming trees in their own backyards. The fact, however, is that such a policy was not recommended by the tree committee, is not in the draft ordinance, and is not supported by anyone, including our organization.

As recommended by the committee, the draft ordinance applies only to projects that require a grading permit from

the county, such as subdivisions, shopping centers and manufacturing facilities. These are the activities that are causing the rapid loss of our county's tree cover and that therefore are properly subject to regulation. The ordinance should not, and will not, apply to individual property owners.

We have done enough studying and talking about this subject. The time has come to get an actual ordinance on the books, like Richland, Lexington, Beaufort, York, Georgetown and Colleton Counties in South Carolina, and as countless communities throughout the United States have already done.

What is needed now is for the silent majority of Greenville County citizens to speak up. Please contact your County Council representative today and urge him or her to approve a strong, effective and comprehensive tree ordinance for Greenville County.

Let's keep the Green in Greenville!
