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ANDERSON, SOUTH CAROLINA

# It's not too late to stop urban sprawl

By Nick Charalambous  
Friday, September 28, 2007

Anderson County's top officials are doing some soul-searching about growth and development.

It's about time.

The Planning Commission, a famously subdued body, is feeling existential angst about whether it's anything more than a rubber stamp to staff and irrelevant to County Council.

The County Council departed from its squabble soap opera to set up a special planning and growth committee.

And county staff has scheduled a six-meeting "road show" in October and November to hear from residents about such things as tree preservation, protection of open space, traffic management, storm water management, zoning and land-use, and community appearance.

There's even talk of countywide zoning. (Gasp!)

In columns and blogs, I've begged officials and residents alike to get serious about the financial waste and environmental destruction that results from our current laissez faire land-use policies that encourage sprawl — or do nothing to prevent it.

Upstate Forever, a tireless local advocate for smart growth, reminded us this summer that we're fifth-worst in the nation for sprawl, and we rank ninth in the nation for the total amount of land being developed (even though our state is 40th in size).

The Urban Land Institute has found the cost of providing services — streets, sewers, water systems, storm drainage and schools — was nearly five times higher for homes on 1-acre lots more than 10 miles away from urban centers than in compact, center cities -- \$163,000 compared to \$35,500 per dwelling in inflation-adjusted dollars.

But everyone knows all that, right?

We have no excuses. We're just trapped inside our selfish desires, and unwilling to sacrifice our comfort.

So many of us want big homes with lots of land, a beautiful unspoiled environment, city services and low taxes.

And everyone knows all that, too. Right?

I think there's a bigger enemy than our selfishness, though: All-or-nothing thinking.

As the tension over development rises in our community, there's a temptation for people to go into full battle mode: Shouting instead of talking. Fake enemies. False arguments.

The real truth to our world and our community's environmental dilemma is that "grand plans" don't solve problems. Modest steps do.

And small sacrifices usually are more effective than we might imagine and less painful than we assume.

Many communities have developed modest, proven ways to limit infrastructure costs, decrease environmental damage, and satisfy our American dreams all at the same time.

We just need to be willing to really listen. And to believe it's true.

It's about time.

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