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Article published Feb 13, 2008

Upstate Forever launches campaign for new growth-management policies

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Published: Wednesday, February 13, 2008 | Updated: 3:53 pm

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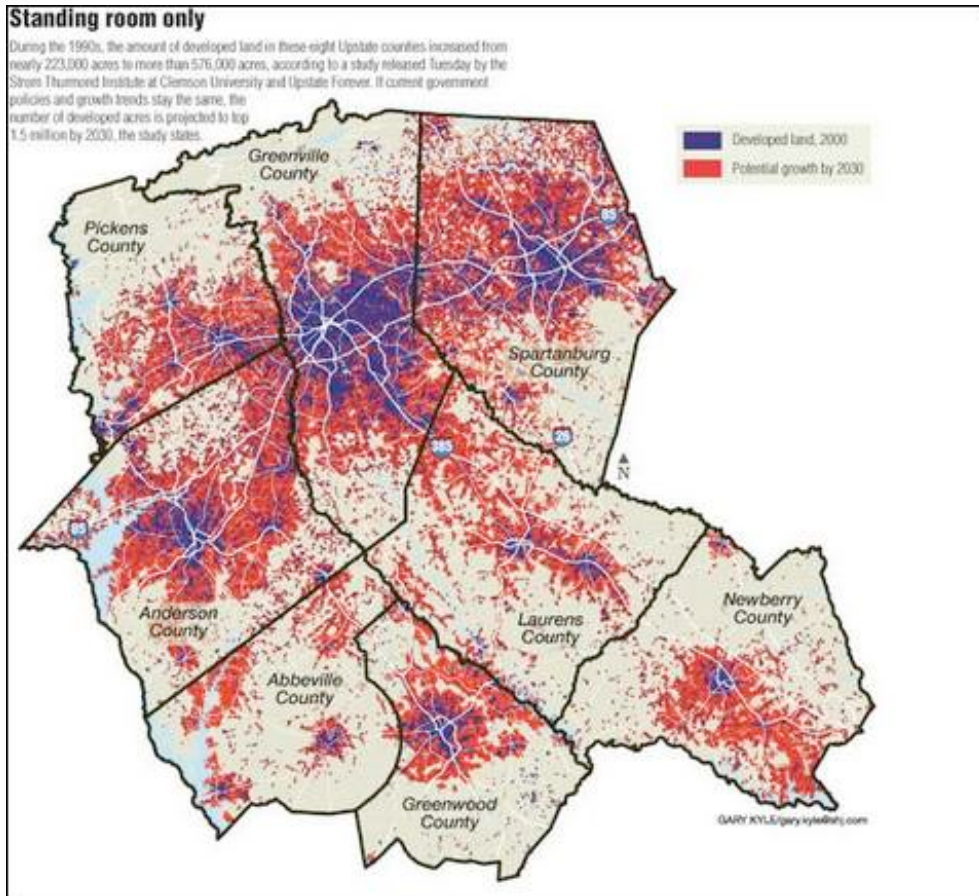
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During the 1990s the amount of developed land in these eight counties increased from 223,000 acres to 576,000 acres.

Upstate counties will lose up to 1.5 million acres to development by 2030 unless new policies are put into place to manage growth, according to a Clemson University report released Tuesday by the nonprofit group Upstate Forever.

That group has a laundry list of such policies - including countywide zoning - that it will encourage county administration and planning organizations from Spartanburg to Anderson to Newberry to adopt in the next few months.

They argue that population and residential and commercial growth will continue, but the amount of land that growth takes up could be cut in half, if sensible policies are adopted.

"Nobody's looking at the big picture," Upstate Forever Executive Director Brad Wyche said. "But if this study isn't a wake-up call, I don't know what is. And it's on all the issues. Economic development. Roads. Water. Education. Everything."

Development out of control

Projections are based on data collected between 1990 and 2000 in eight Upstate counties. The population grew by 15 percent, but the amount of land developed grew by 80 percent during that time. In academic terms, that's a 5-to-1 growth ratio.

Continuing at that rate for the next two decades means about 86 acres will be developed every day.

That's slightly larger than the footprint of Haywood Mall in Greenville.

Cities and counties need to put more emphasis on redevelopment and revitalization projects (think Academy Sports going into the former west-side Lowe's Home Improvement building), developing cleared land in already-urban areas (called "in-fill development"), countywide zoning, and allowing the transfer of "development rights" from rural areas to urban areas (where landowners can negotiate deals with developers to allow for denser development in and around cities), Wyche said.

Parts - if not all - of that is going to be a hard sell.

"Right now, everybody should be concerned about the lack of growth," said Frank Nutt, a developer and former Spartanburg County councilman.

"You can't force people to live where they don't want to live. And you can't force businesses to go where they don't want to go. Our history is pretty good with that. I don't think anything about that has been a drawback to us so far."

But Wyche and his associates - they began a two-day tour of area newspapers and television stations Tuesday - insist that development will still come. Their point is that counties have bargaining power, that land-use policies won't deter growth, that zoning won't scare away the next BMW. Basically, they argue that growth is coming - it's just a matter of how.

And they're fairly ambitious. Angela Viney, director of Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office, believes that countywide zoning can happen here in a year.

Otherwise, this area will become just like Atlanta, riddled with sprawl and traffic congestion, Upstate Forever representatives said.

"That's just one of the whole battery of tools and strategies - zoning. There's many different types of zoning, and many different concepts. So, it's premature to even speculate about any of that," Assistant County Administrator Chris Story said.

"It's only one piece of the game plan. What do we do with our roads? What do we do with our schools? What do we do with our water lines and sewer lines? There's a whole soup of stuff that affects how that map will look in 30 years. Regulations are a part of that ... but there's a whole set of factors."

The county government has contracted with several firms to review its land-use policies. An initial assessment of those policies is expected within a few weeks, though any policy changes probably wouldn't come up until the fall, Story said.

Until then, "The more information, the better," he said.

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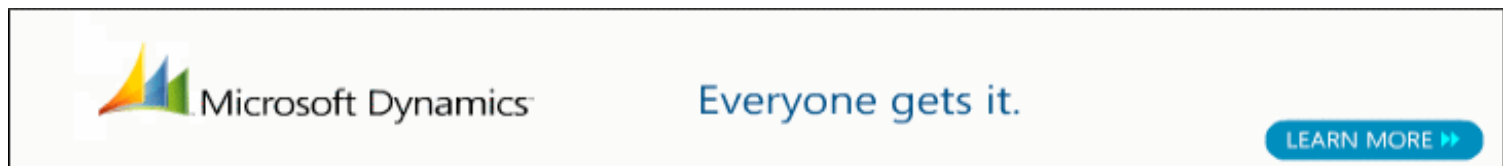
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