



## Water Worries

### Richland Conference Addresses Protecting, Restoring Watersheds

by : Natasha Chilingirian

Columbia is no Atlanta.

For the longest time, many locals expressed that observation with city envy, contemplating all "Hotlanta" has that Columbia doesn't.

But increasingly, the phrase has taken on an opposite meaning — relief that Columbia does not suffer from the kind of strain that the Georgia capital's population puts on its transportation infrastructure and water and other natural resources.

That is the situation for now anyway. Whether it will remain that way is an open question.

Columbia and Richland County planners expect about 225,000 people to move to this area in the next 20-plus years. The projected growth raises many questions, including how the area can revitalize and protect its green spaces and waterways in the future.

To try to answer that question, about 150 people — conservationists, elected officials and interested residents — gathered Feb. 14 at Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia for the Richland County Conservation Commission's "Blue Waters and Greenways" conference.

Conference speakers agreed that it is possible to develop thriving communities, filled with recreational opportunities and beauty, without sacrificing natural resources.

Doing so, they said, will require education and cooperation, especially in view of the population growth on the horizon.

"If we keep doing what we've been doing, in 2030, we're going to look a lot like Atlanta," said Brad Wyche, director of the [Upstate Forever](#) conservation group.

Wyche said Atlanta could be running out of water and might need to look elsewhere for a supply. "Atlanta is in big trouble, and I'm sure we'll see a big effort from Georgia to move into the Savannah River."



**With about 225,000 people expected to move to the Columbia area in the next 20-plus years, local conservationists and urban planners are strategizing ways to protect the Congaree River and other waterways. Photo by**

**Jonathan Sharpe**

So far, Columbia has not encountered such a scenario. However, the area's water supply is becoming ever more important. Last summer, for example, the city imposed nonessential water use restrictions on Northeast Richland, saying demand in the rapidly growing area was outpacing supply.

Conference speakers called for educational efforts and a collaborative approach in order to avoid those kinds of problems.

"We need to know about the worth of water now, not when the well runs dry," Wyche said.

Watersheds, or areas of land that drain precipitation into a water body, are some of the first places that must be cared for in Richland County, said Andy Miller, watershed coordinator for the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Watersheds are necessary to prevent flooding, provide drinking water, filter pollutants and regulate temperatures, Miller said. But storm-water runoff has brought pollutants to local watersheds, and governing bodies need to work together to manage the watersheds of Richland County, he said.

"We need to take a holistic look and make sure the economic benefits of healthy watersheds are tracked, tallied and recognized by the community," Miller said. "We need to draw on a sense of place. Columbia is home, and people have an emotional connection to home."

Tim Trautman, flood mitigation program manager for the Charlotte area, provided inspiration for the audience by sharing a story of how a damaged, disappearing Little Sugar Creek was transformed into a healthy community asset. Prior to the 1960s, buildings went up along the creek and it was viewed as a "sewage disposal" until it was "declared dead," Trautman said.

A recent revitalization effort has included fortifying the banks of Little Sugar Creek with rocks to prevent erosion, developing green spaces and recreation areas adjacent to the water, tearing down structures that once covered the creek and educating the public about the importance of the water body.

Now, not only is the area more attractive, but Trautman said the values of homes near the creek have skyrocketed.

"We need to treat our streams as natural resources that enhance the quality of life," he said. "There are economic development opportunities because people want to be by a greenway, stream or wetland that has been beautified."

On a smaller scale locally, Richland County is helping coordinate restoration of the polluted Gills Creek watershed, which covers Forest Acres and Arcadia Lakes.

As Charlotte's Little Sugar Creek proved, nature can provide communities with something special.

"When people began thinking of Little Sugar Creek differently, they thought of adding green spaces and recreational areas," Trautman said. "It made people think that the resources we have can be an asset for the community."

*News editor Eric Ward contributed to this report.*