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Upstate needs to plan better for growth

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Here's a thought that should make everyone cringe: The Upstate, but particularly Greenville County, could look a lot like the Atlanta area in a few decades if something isn't done to push our region toward "smarter" growth.

That's certainly a scary thought. More traffic congestion. Less green space. Fewer untouched places guaranteed to take your breath away. More pollution. Sprawl that continues its unchallenged spread. Rivers carrying more polluted runoff. More expensive government caused by having to extend services farther and farther away from existing metropolitan areas.

Now for some good news. The Upstate can control its growth. It can shape its destiny. That's if local elected officials will adopt some sound planning practices and then, even more importantly, find the courage to enforce those practices.

A study by Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute used a growth model to predict what an eight-county Upstate region would look like if it continued with the development patterns of the past decade. From 1990 to 2000, the researchers found that for every 10 percent increase in population growth, land development increased by 50 percent.

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This 5-to-1 ratio of land development to population growth is staggering. Left unchecked, it threatens to swallow entire undeveloped areas that we now consider "rural."

The study came from a four-year effort by Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute with Upstate Forever and the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium. It is "one of the most important studies that has ever been done for our region," said Brad Wyche, Upstate Forever's executive director.

The eight-county region included the following counties: Greenville, Spartanburg, Anderson, Pickens, Laurens, Newberry, Abbeville and Greenwood. This region grew from 222,745 acres of developed land in 1990 to 576,336 acres in 2000. If the type of development continues, there will be 1,523,667 acres of developed land in these eight counties by 2030.

To put it in terms that most people can grasp, the Upstate is developing about 80 acres daily -- the pave-over rate equivalent to a new Haywood Mall every day.

The rate at which land is developed doesn't have to outpace population growth to this degree, according to Wyche and Jeff Allen, director of the South Carolina Water Resources Center for Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute. As Allen, who was the project leader, said, the region can avoid the fate predicted in the study by "developing less land relative to population growth."

Development didn't always look like this in the Upstate. Another Clemson study in 2005 found that the Upstate's growth ratio from 1940 to 1990 was 0.5 -- meaning that developed land increased only 5 percent for each 10 percent increase in the population.

Wyche said a growth ratio of 1-to-1 -- meaning only 1 percent more developed land for every 1 percent increase in population -- "is very doable." That would result in only 766,000 more developed acres by 2030. But even higher ratios, say 3-to-1, would save more undeveloped land from the asphalt spreader.

Calling the study "a huge wake-up call for the Upstate," Wyche said there are "tools" available to scale back the pave-over rate, rein in the sprawl, and cut back on the pollution and frightening loss of undeveloped land.

Included among Wyche's "tools" were: land use controls; a return to the "traditional neighborhood design" instead of building spurs off major highways; filling in undeveloped gaps in urban areas; restricting where water and sewer lines are installed and new schools are built; adopting "transfer of development rights" programs where landowners in desirable undeveloped areas (such as State 11) sell their development rights to developers who would then be allowed to increase the density of projects in urban areas.

Changing the direction of development in the Upstate will require political leadership. Last week Allen presented the Clemson study to the Greenville County Council that soon will begin a new comprehensive land use plan. Greenville residents who want this area to grow more sensibly need to make their voices heard as this new plan is developed.
