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Why It's Keen To Be Green

BY BRAD WYCHE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UPSTATE FOREVER

About eight years ago, the Greenville County School District announced its plan to spend nearly \$1 billion on 70 new and renovated schools. At Upstate Forever, we saw an opportunity to build healthy, energy efficient, and environmentally friendly schools throughout the county – a model for the nation. So we launched a major “Green Schools for Greenville” campaign.

Despite a lot of effort and work, the campaign received little attention and support. The School District ended up approving only one truly green school (Riverside High) – a sad result for everyone, especially students and teachers.

If we undertook that campaign today, I think we would have green schools everywhere.

What most Americans a few years ago considered a fringe movement of tree-huggers has suddenly and dramatically moved into the mainstream.

What happened? Why is it now so easy and so cool to be green?

I believe there are two basic reasons. First, at long last there is widespread recognition that our planet is in serious trouble. We face a monumental crisis in the shocking and accelerating degradation and depletion of the very resources on which life itself depends. Every living system is declining at an unprecedented rate. In the past 50 years, we have lost one-fourth of the earth's top soil and one-third of its forest cover, and this loss continues at the rate of 800 tons of top soil every second and 5,000 acres of forest cover every hour. Closer to home, Greenville County loses nearly 15 acres of its tree cover every day.

In just the past 30 years, we have consumed one-third of the planet's natural resources. At the present rate of consumption, with world population increasing by 10,000 people every hour, there will be little left by the end of this century.

We are witnessing a massive extinction of plant and animal species – at the rate of 27,000 per year. And on top of all of this is the greatest threat of all – climate change, with its destructive consequences of melting glaciers, rising sea levels and more frequent and intense storms.

In response to this crisis, more people are “thinking globally and acting locally.” Green action is taking place here in our community, with the construction of more EarthCraft homes and LEED-certified buildings; the opening of the Swamp Rabbit Tram-Trail; approval of the TRAC plan for more parks and greenways; the opening of the Lake Conestee Nature Park; a county tree ordinance; new bicycle lanes; new developments using traditional neighborhood design; and important lands protected through funding from the South Carolina Conservation Bank.

The second reason is less altruistic. People who might not care very much about our planet's peril are finding that green also means money. Last month The Wall Street Journal published a special report called “Eco-Nomics: Creating Environmental Capital,” documenting the rapidly expanding “pot of green gold” for businesses, investors, and consumers. “Green collar jobs” is the new term that describes the burgeoning opportunities for employment in the eco-economy.

The Wall Street Journal report specifically cites clean energy as “the largest economic opportunity of the 21st century.” With its vast agricultural fields, off-shore wind, hydrogen fuel research, and business acumen, South Carolina is in a unique position to become a world leader in clean energy, creating countless “green collar jobs” and reaping enormous economic benefits for our state.

More and more individuals, families, companies, and state and local governments (the federal government hopefully will get on board soon) are setting inspiring and ambitious green goals, but extraordinary efforts and commitments will be needed to achieve them. The green movement is exactly that – a movement. We have a long way to go, but finally we are moving in the right direction. ■

In Your Words is a regular opinion column and does not necessarily reflect the views of Greenville Magazine.