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Council, Upstate Forever try to discuss growth, land-use policies

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Spartanburg County Council and Upstate Forever seem to have similar goals, but watching their interaction Monday was like watching two people who speak different languages trying to communicate.

The nonprofit group made several pitches for "sensible growth" policies after a Clemson University professor talked about the impact of sprawl on the Upstate.

The impetus for the awkward discussion is a Clemson study that predicts eight Upstate counties will lose a total of 1.5 million acres to development by 2030 unless there's an attitude adjustment among area planners.

That study, released in February during a short media blitz, was helmed by South Carolina Water Resources Center Director Jeff Allen, and uses growth patterns from 1990 to 2000 to map out the future. Upstate Forever points to the study and says countywide zoning, in-fill development and the ability of landowners to transfer "development rights" from rural areas to urban ones - among other policies - must be put in place now to keep the Upstate from becoming a suburb of Atlanta.

"You don't want to stop growth, because you kill your economy, you kill your communities. But you want to be smart about it," Allen said. "You want to make some decisions about how you are going to grow."

Allen and Angela Viney, from Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office, had to re-iterate several times that they weren't advocating anti-growth policies - that growth was coming no matter what, and it could be "tempered" to fit in the urbanized section in the middle of the county, leaving the northern and southern portions largely rural.

The Clemson study says that at the current growth rate, about 86 acres - roughly the same size as the footprint of Haywood Mall in Greenville - will be developed every day for the next 20 years.

Councilman David Britt seemed to act almost as a translator for the two groups.

He questioned the viability of some of the figures presented, saying that the 10-year period leading up to 2000 - the decade that brought BMW to Spartanburg, along with a slow avalanche of ancillary companies - made the data suspect when projecting the future because such a boom doesn't come to the area that often.

Britt also pointed out that groups, mostly in rural areas, that once were the loudest in trying to block zoning or strict-land use regulations have now switched and are the same groups calling for protection because they don't want to be swallowed up by development.

"I don't think anyone wants us to look like Atlanta," Britt said. "This information is helpful. And I don't think you see anybody fighting this, either. We're just trying to be smart about it."

Allen said that, as a researcher, he tries to remain as objective as possible. When asked whether he thought the council understood his point, he said, "I hope so. You probably won't know for another 20 years."

Assistant County Administrator Chris Story called the study another tool that could be used for planning for growth, but said he didn't expect elected officials to take any kind of immediate action because of it.

The county is in the midst of a long process of having its land-use policies collected and assessed.

One consultant presented a report to the county last week that noted Spartanburg has many policies in place that resemble zoning, only that's not what it's called and there's no associated map. The consultant will continue to meet with and make recommendations to the county as to how it should proceed when it comes to land-use regulation.

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