

Into the Woods

Preserving the local landscape versus protecting Constitutional rights

Point: Save the Trees

Written by Nancy Fitzer

Awild political rollercoaster ride came to an end when Greenville County Council finally enacted a tree conservation ordinance earlier this year after three years of delays, meetings, misinformation, and wrangling. In a nutshell, in the unincorporated areas of the county, developers can no longer cut down every last tree on a site without replacing at least some of them. Greenville's tree ordinance is a good start, but it doesn't go nearly far enough.

It is well-documented that trees protect air quality, improve property values, safeguard public health, mitigate temperature extremes, maintain water quality, prevent floods, preserve community history and character, and foster economic well-being. These are factors that affect us all, whether we live in the city, country, or suburbs.

The most glaring weakness of the tree ordinance is that it offers no protection at all for existing trees. Even heritage trees—the extremely large, old, and unique trees that we all know and love and mourn when lost to development—are not protected by the ordinance. These trees can be cut down without a word to anyone as long as the minimal

requirements for the ordinance are met.

In many communities throughout the state, old and important trees can be removed only as a last resort. Conway and Beaufort recognize the irreplaceable historic and cultural value of their heritage trees and offer compelling evidence that stringent requirements do not drive away development. To the contrary,

they enhance it.

The ordinance does require developers to replant trees, but these new trees can be as small as one and a quarter inches in diameter. Think about the branching structure of a mature tree: It could take a one-and-a-quarter-inch-diameter tree a generation or more to develop a root system, branches, and leaves that would render amazing benefits such as absorbing anywhere from 120 to 240 pounds of air pollutants (particulate matter and gases) every year.

A mature tree canopy also reduces air temperatures by five to 10 degrees, influencing

the internal temperature of nearby buildings. Properly placed trees in the landscape can produce savings of up to 58 percent on daytime air conditioning—as high as 65 percent for mobile homes. A 28-foot-tall tree can also intercept 58 gallons of water in its crown area during a half-inch rainfall. And over one year, one acre of trees absorbs the amount of car-

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—Nancy Fitzer

bon dioxide produced by driving a car 26,000 miles. (Citations for all statistics can be found at www.upstateforever.org/newsviews_other/Trees08_26_05/index.htm.)

Unfortunately, many of our citizens have a deep mistrust of government, especially concerning regulations on private property. Even though the ordinance unequivocally applies only to new developments and not to individual homeowners, some refuse to believe it, insisting that the county would keep them from working on trees in their backyards. Others took it a step further, seeing the protection

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no space is more personal than the place called **home**

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of our tree cover as part of a conspiracy to do away with private property altogether. "Just leave us alone!" goes the thinking.

This perception is misguided. You can barricade yourself on your property and think your way of life is safe, but air and water, sounds and smells do not respect property lines. If your neighbor sells his property to a developer who then cuts down all the trees, you will have to deal with the negative effects of flooding, sedimentation, noise, and loss of natural beauty. If too many trees are cut down throughout the region, you will

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have to breathe the polluted air and withstand the visual assault of a treeless, strip-malled landscape. What our neighbors do affects us, whether those neighbors are next door or across the county.

It's clear we are consuming green space at an alarming rate. In just 15 years (1985 to 2000), the amount of developed land in Greenville County increased by more than 90,000 acres—a staggering rate of 16 acres per day or the equivalent of a brand new Haywood Mall every five days. If we don't take action, the name *Greenville* will become a sad irony. Our health, quality of life, and economy will all suffer.

Our region is growing, whether we like it or not. But *how* we grow is up to us. A strong and effective tree conservation ordinance will help ensure that Greenville County remains healthy and prosperous. Future generations will thank us for it. 

Nancy Fitzer is education director for Upstate Forever, a nonprofit group that promotes sensible growth, and she appreciates shade on a hot day.

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