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Upstate could look like Atlanta, warn conservationists, planners

Ray Chandler/Special to the Independent-Mail
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OCONEE COUNTY — Some experts in urban planning and development think the Upstate could have urban sprawl that could make it the next Atlanta unless steps are taken to channel and direct growth that, the experts say, seems inevitable.

John Tynan, a project manager with the conservation group Upstate Forever, presented at an event Friday an outline of a study indicating that the rapidly populating Upstate develops land at a rate five times the percentage of population increase.

That was alarming, Tynan told an audience comprised of members of the conservation group Oconee Forever and others.

“It’s not just the loss of natural area, but the infrastructure that comes with it,” he said. “There are the roads, the impervious surfaces (that lead to water runoff) and the cost of services like water, sewer and trash disposal. The cost can be staggering.”

Projections out to 2030 showed a map indicating a steady turning to urban sprawl across the Upstate along the Interstate 85 corridor as Tynan illustrated the possible effects of unrestricted and unchanneled growth.

But for Oconee County, which wasn’t included in the original study by Clemson University’s Strom Thurmond Institute, the story could be even worse.

“In Oconee County, the rate of land use is 12 times the rate of population increase,” Tynan said.

According to figures in the study, in 1990, Oconee County was the site of roughly 14,000 acres of developed land. By 2000, the figure was roughly 40,000 acres. The projection for 2010 is roughly 60,000 acres, and that could more than double by 2030 to about 124,000 acres. More staggering, Tynan said, is that those numbers indicate a sharp change from growth patterns that existed up until about 1990, when typically the rate of land development was half the rate of population growth.

The key, Tynan said, lies in public policies that can reduce the rate of development to perhaps equal the rate of population growth.

Some strategies for containing sprawl involve revitalizing the idea of traditional neighborhood development, redevelopment of existing areas, land use planning and conservation, Tynan said.

Tim Beatley, who specializes in “smart growth” strategies at the University of Virginia’s School of Architecture, told the gathering the worse case for Upstate sprawl should not be seen as inevitable.

Beatley stressed that sprawl had resulted in a number of economic and sociological problems that might be reversed by changing circumstances.

In particular, need to be more energy conscious would lead to more compact development where accessibility by walking or public transit would play a role, he said.

“About 25 percent to 40 percent of space these days is devoted to cars,” he said, indicating roads, streets, and parking spaces.

All the strategies pointed out by Tynan had their place, Beatley said, but “zoning was a good start.”

But it wasn't an end, he said. Another step is establishment of form-based codes that spell out what development, and what form of development, is desired in a particular area.

“Zoning tells you what you don't want in an area,” Beatley said. “Form-based codes tell you what you do want.”

Oconee County officials said they shared some of the concerns expressed Friday.

County Planning Director Art Holbrooks said consideration of the growth projections in the Strom Thurmond Institute study would be taken into account as Oconee County revamps its comprehensive plan next year.

County Council Chairman George Blanchard was impressed by the strategies for managing growth.

“What amazes me is that there were some people who heard this who would probably oppose (the strategies),” Blanchard said.



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