



November 10, 2008

Upstate seeks fresh ideas to clear its air

New, tighter standards mean it's time for area to get back to work

By Nan Lundeen
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Greenville County is reorganizing an environmental task force of area government staffers and environmental experts from business and industry to look for fresh ideas on how to meet tightened federal air quality standards that state officials are already warning might be out of reach, according to county manager of planning John Owings.

After first being ruled in nonattainment, the Upstate worked hard for five years to meet previous standards, but 90 days after succeeding, the federal Environmental Protection Agency tightened those standards, he said.

"The patting on the back is done, now it's grab a shovel and get at it again," he said.

Nonattainment could mean rigorous, EPA-imposed emission-permitting regulations that could risk federal highway dollars and make permitting new industry, and the creation of new jobs, difficult.

Renee Shealy, assistant chief of the state Department of Health and Environmental Control's Bureau of Air Quality, has predicted the area won't meet new Clean Air Standards in 2010.

DHEC is urging communities to act even though it doesn't know whether EPA again will permit areas to address nonattainment with voluntary action, called early action compacts that delayed nonattainment status, to clean up the air.

The new standard is 0.075 parts per million for 8-hour ground level ozone, and Upstate monitors are exceeding that, DHEC said.

Greenville County Councilman Butch Kirven said, "we don't see a dramatic impact for Greenville County."

His reasons: The county's economy is shifting toward more high-tech activities, not heavy industries that would fall under tighter emissions standards, and competitors around the country are faced with the same more-stringent standards.

He added that, "by raising the bar, it will also encourage more research and technology and innovation to allow industries to comply in beneficial ways that benefit all of us."

Spartanburg County is working to implement an air-quality action plan, said Assistant County Administrator Chris Story.

As in Greenville County, Spartanburg County is capturing methane from landfills to provide energy. To reduce emissions from idling vehicles, a major source of ground-level ozone, "We're targeting our efforts on improving traffic flow on our main corridors," Story said.

Outgoing Anderson County Council Chairman Michael G. Thompson expressed frustration that his

efforts to impose a no-burning ban failed.

"We have a severe problem where people want to burn leaves. That stuff just chokes you to death," he said, adding, "as of this point in time, there are no plans of the County Council to take any action regarding nonattainment."

Environmental engineer Ruth Albright, a member of Greenville County's committee, said not only smokestack industry is at issue, but the community needs to "find creative ways to get people out of their cars" and to improve mileage.

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, said, "I don't think the Upstate has a chance unless we get serious about land use and transportation planning."

County councils have the authority to impose zoning -- one tool that would reduce urban sprawl and thus, vehicle miles driven, a major contributor to car emissions, according to Wyche.

Ben Haskew, president of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, said the issue requires a "proactive approach."

Haskew said the Chamber's longstanding environmental committee, made up of most of the community's major industry and environmental consultants, will be the springboard for the Chamber to play a role going forward.

Owings said, "if we reach the goal of attainment, I think it's always better for local government to figure out what works for us than for somebody in Washington to tell us what works good for us."

Nationwide, 12 of 13 early action compacts succeeded in meeting 8-hour ozone standards, with the exception being Denver, the EPA said last April.
