



January 29, 2009

## Saving some open space

Advisory from the American Farmland Trust: Every minute of every single day, America loses two acres of farmland.

Or has been until the recent economic implosion. That won't last.

What have we been doing with this farmland? Bulldozing it for subdivisions or parking lots or strip malls and the like. Over the last decade or so, the rate we bulldozed across the nation picked up speed. Dramatically.

In the 1990s, we lost farm and ranch land 51 percent faster than in the '80s, the trust notes.

It wasn't just because there were more of us. From 1982 to 1997, the U.S. population grew by 17 percent but the amount of land we paved over or built something on grew by 47 percent.

South Carolina made the trust's list of top 20 states losing the most prime farmland in the five-year period from 1992 and 1997. The Upstate has been losing open space at the rate of 86 acres a day.

That's bad for all kinds of reasons, not simply because our fields and woods, farmlands and rivers and mountains -- the natural beauty of our area -- are an enormous asset, a richness of sounds and sights and wildlife that help make life here good.

But also because the wrong kind of growth, sprawled out scattered development, brings traffic, air and water pollution and a net fiscal loss for communities because they have to pay for public services -- such as sewer and water lines, fire and police protection -- to be extended out to these developments.

It's not that we grow. It's the way we grow.

"People move to and love the Upstate because it is such a beautiful area," says Dana Leavitt, land trust director for the nonprofit Upstate Forever. We have vistas that take people's breath.

"As we continue to continue to develop the region, it's important that we keep many of these cherished areas intact," Leavitt says. He mentions the woods and land along Highway 11 and the Chattooga River, "and the working farms and forest lands within our rural communities."

In most cases, he notes, it's best when these properties stay in private hands. Landowners will look out for them. And the taxes they pay will benefit their communities.

There are ways for that to happen and the owners still gain financially without selling off acreage for development: conservation agreements.

In return, until the end of 2009, landowners can get significantly increased tax incentives, "the most dramatic improvements in the tax code for conservation in over 25 years," the nonprofit Upstate Forever has called them.

Leavitt says landowners can take a deduction up to 50 percent of their adjusted gross income, "and

they can take the deductions for as long as 16 years."

It will all be explained at a daylong conference sponsored by Upstate Forever ([www.upstateforever.org](http://www.upstateforever.org)) on Feb. 3 Tuesday at the Carolina First Center in Greenville. You can reach Upstate Forever by phone at (864) 250-0500.

Experts will cover legal and financial issues regarding the agreements, and a panel of landowners will talk about why they voluntarily protected their properties that way. They'll take questions from the audience.

Accountants, attorneys, city and regional planners, financial planners and foresters can earn continuing education credits by attending.

All citizens who hope their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will have the chance to know something of the Upstate as we know it today are also welcome.

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