

LOCAL NEWS

United Upstate could plan regionally

Effort would bring 10-county area together to coordinate development

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Organizers of a new push for regional planning in the Upstate say they don't want to dictate the specific outcomes of the initiative but instead want ideas to bubble up from the 10 counties they're trying to rally for the cause.

An organizer said one possibility is the South Carolina Conservation Bank, a state program that protects special lands from development.

The Upstate, if it comes together for regional planning, could speak with one voice in making applications to the Conservation Bank, said Jacki Martin, who is managing the push

for regional planning for the Urban Land Institute.

"Everyone at the Statehouse is saying bring us regional applications or don't bring us anything when it comes to the Conservation Bank," Martin said. "It's got to have a regional impact. And, of course, the same thing is true" for the State Infrastructure Bank, which provides funding for roads and bridges.

The Conservation Bank, which is funded by a portion of the state's documentary fee, has supplied more than \$80 million to protect 152,720 acres across the state, including the 1,690-acre Asbury Hills tract in northern Greenville and Pickens counties.

Martin said another possible outcome of the regional planning push is agreement among the 10 counties to coordinate development of their individual comprehensive plans.

The effort is supported by a broad group of civic leaders and organizations, including two prominent businessmen from Greenville: Irv Welling, former chairman of the Elliott Davis accounting firm, and Steve Navarro, president of The Furman Co., a real estate firm.

They said the Upstate stands to add 234,000 residents, 118,000 households and 203,000 jobs by 2030. The figures come from Woods & Poole Economics Inc., a research firm, and are more conservative than those from the federal Census Bureau, Martin said.

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Navarro said the Upstate needs to decide how it will grow.

"Do we do this by choice or by chance?" he said. "The important thing is beginning to get together and create that dialogue."

Organizers of the effort will consult with as many as 400 civic leaders about how South Carolina's 10 westernmost counties can work together on planning at an April 8 event at the Carolina First Center.

At the event, called Reality Check Upstate, participants will use Lego blocks to plot households

and jobs on a map of the Upstate as part of a learning exercise. Robert Grow, a Salt Lake City lawyer who was part of Envision Utah, a well-known "quality growth" initiative, will be special speaker.

The Urban Land Institute has sponsored Reality Check events around the country, including one in Charleston in 2007 that Martin helped organize.

The Upstate event marks the start of a multi-year "collaborative regional visioning process" to define a shared vision for planning, organizers say. A

special committee will develop an "action plan" based on ideas that surface at the April 8 event. A group called Upstate Together will then work to implement the plan.

"We become a better place if we get people together and solve our problems," Welling said.

Reality Check sponsors, in addition to the Urban Land Institute, include Clemson University, Furman University, Oconee Medical Center, Spartanburg Regional Hospital and the University of South Carolina Upstate. Various companies are also part of the effort, as are the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, the Greenville County Planning Commission and Upstate Forever, an environmental group.