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Design standards: Businesses should enhance our community

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For the *Herald-Journal*

Published: Sunday, September 6, 2009 at 3:15 a.m.

When this Dollar General on Country Club Road issue first came about, I heard about a Dollar General in McClellanville that uses brick and Hardiplank on the exterior and includes shutters, a pitched roof and a kind of front porch.

It has that "general store" look that the name of the store alludes to. It cost more to build than the typical metal box, but the resulting increase in rent for Dollar General did not result in it pulling out of the deal.



The design is the result of the town of McClellanville's design standards, passed in 2000-2002 to protect the look of the town. According to Town Administrator Mary Duke, "Once [Dollar General] understood what was required, they worked very well with us."

If we have design standards in place, county planners can work with developers to build the types of buildings that we would be proud of; that would provide guidance to building owners looking to renovate; that would help create the look that gives us a sense of place and keeps us from being Anywhere, USA; that would raise property values; and that would serve as examples for other communities.

We could be a model of building design, and rather than struggle to catch up with the crisis of the month, we would show our citizens and those considering Spartanburg County as their home that we care about our community's appearance as much as we care about our commercial opportunities.

But this is not about a Dollar General on Country Club Road. It's not about a bank at River Falls Plantation, a fitness center on Farm Lake Road or a trucking company next door to Chestnut Lakes — our previously publicized development crises of the

past year.

Or rather, it's about all those things. After four crises, we should get the idea that pretty soon, this will happen in my backyard, too.

Wouldn't we rather have commercial and light industrial buildings that enhance the appearance of the communities in which they're built, no matter where in the county that might be?

This crisis points to the need for more comprehensive land-use planning. Unless we address the issues on a county-wide basis, we'll just have this same situation next month or next year. Without planning, we end up with a hodge-podge of development with no character, no direction and no clues as to what we might find around the corner.

Land-use planning isn't about stopping development, either. We are now stuck in that position of trying to stop this or that development because of a lack of land-use planning. Our recent effective moratorium on development is the result of a lack of land-use planning.

With good land-use planning, we wouldn't have to fight development. We could arrange the pieces — the schools, the neighborhoods, the shops, the fitness centers, the parks, the industrial areas and even the trucking distribution centers — in ways that complete communities to meet the needs of the citizens. So you would know when you move into a house just what could go on that vacant property across the street, or on that wooded lot on the corner that you've always loved.

Land-use planning is a system, not just a set of design standards or subdivision regulations. It involves transportation decisions, design decisions, storm water management decisions, landowner decisions and community decisions. It includes plans for dealing with abandoned and vacant properties, and could begin to address the preponderance of empty big-box stores in the county. It is the most equitable means of achieving true community goals that protect quality of life and character.

Our current subdivision regulations are inflexible. The Unified Land Management Ordinance (ULMO), which currently guides development, does not allow for mixed use villages, where a neighborhood's compatible commercial and residential uses can exist in coordination. It does not allow for traditional neighborhood design with grid street patterns, narrower right-of-ways and shallow setbacks.

In other words, the existing regulations in our ULMO do not allow landowners and developers to "do what they want with their land." Without a use element in our ULMO, we get the "incompatibility" we hear so much about — trucking distribution centers next to subdivisions, for example, as in Chestnut Lakes.

Further measures could be taken to assure low-impact development techniques that reduce impact on drinking water sources and often result in less cost for

developers. We could require big-box retailers to file contingency plans for their properties once they vacate them to try to ameliorate our excess of empty big-box retail space. With an effective transportation plan, we could coordinate plans for walking and biking trails so that developers could market their proximity to planned or existing facilities. We could, in short, become a model of community design.

These issues therefore are community issues and demand community involvement. Land-use planning is not about predicting where growth will occur but rather deciding where growth will occur. We need more people to come out to meetings and hearings to support land-use planning.

We need true dialogue, not screaming matches, to come to sensible agreements about the future of our county, to meet the needs of the residents, to protect our quality of life, to attract business and industry, to protect the natural environment and to grow in ways that will make us a model community.

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