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DHEC urges county to address air quality

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Published: Monday, September 14, 2009 at 3:15 a.m.

Air quality has been a lingering issue for Spartanburg County for some time now, an issue that was going to have to be addressed at some point.

That point is fast approaching.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control issued a report in March naming the middle swath of Spartanburg County as one of seven areas in the state that will not be in compliance when new, more stringent federal air quality standards are implemented early next year.

Spartanburg has been teetering just below the attainment threshold, and officials have worried that the new standards would push the county into non-attainment.

"We know that we need to continue to do more to improve the air quality, but we don't yet know definitively that will be in non-attainment," Assistant County Administrator Chris Story said. "And we don't know what that status would mean specifically to our community. We know it's not a good thing."

The Environmental Protection Agency uses a three-year average to determine an area's air quality and whether it meets, in this case, federal ozone standards. Story and other officials called the past few months "a good summer" because it was cool and wet -- extreme heat causes ozone to form more rapidly -- and pointed out that the current data state and federal agencies have doesn't include this summer.

Still, it might not have been good enough, Story said.

Non-attainment could mean a more rigorous permitting process for businesses and industry when it comes to emissions. It also could impact road construction and maintenance.

"There's all kinds of economic impact -- some direct, like loss of federal highway funds; some is indirect, like the loss of companies that won't locate in a county that's in a state of non-attainment," said Ned Barrett, program manager at Upstate Forever.

The county, Upstate Forever, the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce and the Spartanburg Development Association have launched a campaign called "The Air We Breathe" to help educate and inform people of the situation and things that can be done to improve it.

Some of those things are simple -- carpooling, for instance.

Lawn mowers, in particular, tend to contribute to poor air quality. Not cutting grass on extremely hot days is something anyone can do to improve that situation.

"That's a relatively minor behavior change. That doesn't require much sacrifice, but it can make a real difference," Story said. "The biggest thing is the effort that we have to get voluntary measures and behavior changes in large organizations, small businesses and households."

At a four-hour forum Wednesday, Danny Patterson with Alabama Partners for Clean Air talked about Birmingham's problems with non-attainment in the mid 1990s. Statistics showed that area lost \$4.6 billion in economic investment and thousands of jobs because of it.

Future forums will focus on technology and practices that can reduce emissions -- and how to pay for the former -- and what neighborhood associations can do to help, Barrett said.

County council has indefinitely tabled talk of banning open burning, and at this point there doesn't seem to be the political will to revive that issue. But such a ban has been called one way to improve air quality here.

"The educational efforts are under way," Story said. "Most folks know they have a family member or a friend that has some sort of respiratory issue. Statistically, there are a whole lot of folks who do. So they know it's reasonable and real to try to deal with these things voluntarily and proactively."
