

The scenic way

BY CHARLES SOWELL | STAFF

STATE ROUTE 11 faces unprecedented development pressure once the recession winds down that will threaten the scenic nature of the highway as it carves a path through northern Greenville and Pickens counties, long-time residents and preservation officials familiar with the roadway say.

That the precious 44 miles of highway running along the base of the Blue Ridge Escarpment may one day look like Gatlinburg, or Pigeon Forge, Tenn., is their greatest fear.

Denigration of the viewsheds in Greenville and Pickens could also threaten a \$21 million public/private investment to promote tourism by the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), they note.

Chris Stone, CVB president, sees the planned Blue Wall Center as less dependent on the Highway 11 corridor as on the surrounding nature preserves and public lands, but also notes the road is the best way to see the area's crown jewels.

The views are what most people remember from their first ride on Route 11.

"The fact of the matter is if Highway 11 didn't already exist we'd all be out trying to raise the money to build it," said Dennis Chastain, who lives a stone's throw from the road near Table Rock State Park.

"If you don't think this kind of scenery has value and isn't worth protecting then just wait a bit and you'll get what we've already seen gobbling up either end of the road.

"When Highway 11 got the federal scenic highway designation we thought

this is going to be our version of the Blue Ridge Parkway," said Chastain.

"What we didn't know is there isn't the same kind of protection for a scenic highway as there is for a U.S. Park Service protected roadway. There is really nothing to protect the views and the scenic quality of the corridor."

There is concern that carries an increasing sense of urgency among preservation oriented groups to protect the major viewsheds that remain through Pickens and Greenville counties.

The roadway is 130 miles long from its start by the weedy lot of an abandoned gas station at the intersection with Interstate 85 on the Georgia state line to its end point by the Cherokee Chronicle where Fredrick and Limestone streets cross in downtown Gaffney.

For two-thirds of the distance Route 11 is little different than any other stretch of primary highway in South Carolina running past trailer parks and through industrial ones in Oconee County. Roadside fruit stands compete with fertilizer wholesalers in Spartanburg County.

The road's end point is within a

couple of strong five-iron shots of the local Wal-Mart and dodges through a platoon of check cashing and payday loan businesses in Gaffney.

DeWitt Stone, chairman of the Pickens County Planning Commission, said the lack of water and sewer along Route 11 in his county is largely responsible for the lack of development.

"If we ever get it up there I think things are bound to change," he said.

It is a sentiment echoed by Dana Leavitt, director of land trust programs, and Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever.

A few fire hydrants blossom like red toadstools along Route 11 near Long Shoals Roadside Park in western Pickens County indicating the presence of a waterline privately paid for by developer Jim Anthony for his Cliffs developments at Lake Keowee.

Wyche and Leavitt are diligently working to pull together conservation easements around the best viewsheds on Route 11. The long straightaway between Blythe Shoals and Caesars Head is a primary target and progress is being made, Wyche said.

This stretch of highway is where Table Rock first hoists above the

treeline and sight of iconic monolith often sends motorists pulling off on the wide road shoulders and reaching for their cameras.

One of their biggest recent successes along Route 11 is a conservation easement for what is to be known as "Grant Meadow."

The property backs up to Table Rock State Park at a mountain known as The Stool and the view from the highway often causes motorists to stop in the middle of the road and scamper over to the guardrail, camera in hand.

Hoyt and Laura Grant's log cabin, red tin roof glowing the distance past a small pond and acres of hay, has become something of a symbol of what was and of what could still be in Pickens County.

"I wouldn't want to see this county fill up with houses," said Laura Grant as she sat beside her husband in a swing on the cabin's front porch and watched hay being baled in the meadow.

"We wanted to keep this property as close to how I remembered it as a young man as possible," said Hoyt.

In some ways the land is wilder now than it was when Grant was a young man. "Today we've got bears coming into the yard. We didn't used to have that kind of wildlife."

He is a lifelong Pickens resident and has worked the land or logged since graduating high school in 1952.

The land will stay in the family and the only restrictions are on certain kinds of development that would mar the view.

"This way we're able to keep the best of that we have," he said.

