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Upstate Forever works to protect the area's natural resources

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At the heart of environmental issues in the Upstate is Upstate Forever, a nonprofit organization that covers nine Upstate counties, including Spartanburg, Greenville, Cherokee and Union. The group aims to promote sensible growth and protect places that are viewed as special.

With nearly 1,800 members and offices in both Spartanburg and Greenville, the group helps educate the public, developers and policy makers about land use, conservation and growth management.

The organization has three main programs: Land Trust, Sustainable Communities, and Clean Air and Water.

The Land Trust program helps protect properties and resources and has signed agreements to protect over 10,000 acres of land in the area. One aspect of the program matches landowners who want to sell their land but don't want to see it divided up into developed areas with buyers who are willing to protect the land.

The Clean Air and Water Program works on such issues as improving air quality and raising awareness about climate change.

The Sustainable Communities program supports green development, parks and more.

The group helped introduce the EarthCraft program to the Upstate and worked with the Greenville Home Builders Association to help make Greenville's first EarthCraft house a possibility in 2006. The program serves as a blueprint for energy- and resource-efficient homes.

The home features solar hot water, soy-based insulation, recycled-pallet flooring and many other earth-friendly features. It is periodically open to groups who want to learn more about environmentally responsible, economically viable choices.

More recently, Upstate Forever hosted a tour of two local homes that meet EarthCraft's high environmentally-friendly standards. Visitors had the chance to learn about these green homes by touring them and asking the builders questions. They also were able to see that these homes look just like any other, according to Angela Viney, director of Sustainable Communities in the Spartanburg office of Upstate Forever.

The group has also been in talks with Habitat for Humanity about the possibility of building EarthCraft homes in Spartanburg, Viney says.

The idea makes a great deal of sense when you consider that Habitat homeowners will reap savings on their energy bills if homes are built to these standards, she points out.

Sometimes people who aren't ready to build a new home can start being more environmentally-conscious in small ways, she says. For example, compact fluorescent light bulbs are cheaper than they used to be, and they save money and energy.

Healthy living is also a priority of Upstate Forever, and group staff and members are working to make Upstate communities places where residents can walk or bike to work or school.

For more information about Upstate Forever's programs or to join, visit www.upstateforever.org or call 864-327-0090.

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