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Environment, federal mandates spur need for upgrade

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It hasn't been all that long since Spartanburg County served as a test site for erosion control practices. By the 1930s, erosion caused by terrace farming on the hilly terrain of the county had so degraded the soil that tough measures instituted by the Department of Interior's Soil Erosion Service were necessary to halt it.



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We've moved beyond the introduction of kudzu as an erosion control method. Spartanburg County's proposed new Storm Water Management and Flood Damage Prevention ordinances aim to take greater measures to manage storm water runoff and avoid impacts from increased runoff quantity, increased soil erosion and decreased water quality.

Storm water regulations begin at the federal level with the Environmental Protection Agency, which is authorized by the Clean Water Act to regulate storm water runoff through the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES). Many states, South Carolina included, are "delegated authorities" - meaning the EPA has delegated its authority to the state to issue these NPDES discharge permits to qualified discharges. The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control issues NPDES permits to both "point source" discharges, which refers to industrial sites, construction sites and wastewater treatment plants, as well as "non-point source" discharges, which focus on municipalities of certain sizes.

Spartanburg County has been issued a Phase II Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) permit by DHEC and now must update local regulations to ensure compliance with these federally mandated requirements to assure that unregulated discharges will not occur to our local streams and water bodies. Upstate Forever believes that some of the positive aspects of these ordinances are crucial to making

real progress to better manage storm water runoff in Spartanburg.

Stream buffers are a low-cost investment in water quality. Buffers help filter pollutants from storm water and slow the velocity of runoff, helping to protect the water quality and bank stability of our streams. Additionally, vegetation within the buffers acts as a natural air filter, providing much-needed assistance to our air quality. Hiking and biking trails can easily be included in the buffer zones. Making these stream buffers "mandatory" rather than "recommended" would ensure better protection of Spartanburg's waterways.

This ordinance also allows developers to use nonconventional storm water management strategies, which provide increased water quality benefits - often at lower costs. Detention ponds provide limited environmental benefits, take up large amounts of otherwise developable land and are unattractive. By contrast, low-impact development techniques provide increased removal of pollutants from storm water runoff, while reducing the volume of runoff from a site.

Additionally, allowing the use of these techniques will reduce costs for developers by reducing the amount of storm water infrastructure required and will increase potential profits by increasing developable land size through reductions in the size requirements for storm water ponds.

Additional changes will allow the county to restrict building construction in areas with a high likelihood of flooding, saving the county money in the long term. The flood prevention ordinance requires developers to produce flood plain maps of areas that currently do not have them. The absence of official flood maps for an area does not signify an absence of flooding problems. We should learn from many nearby municipalities that are currently implementing costly "buyout" programs to remove homes from flood-prone areas and require assurance that this won't happen in Spartanburg County.

While requiring developers to identify flood elevations for these unmapped areas will increase initial development costs, the long-term financial benefits for the taxpayers of Spartanburg County outweigh any short-term costs.

As county engineer Ron Kirby said, "We can't fix the past, but we can try to plug loopholes for the future."

While these new ordinances are not perfect, Upstate Forever encourages County Council to adopt them now to protect our community and its resources in the future. Although change is often feared and sometimes difficult, we need to take serious steps now - before we get too large - to protect the quality of our water bodies by reducing the quantity of and improving the quality of our storm water runoff.

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