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Zoning law changes could fight urban sprawl

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By Nan Lundeen
GREATER GREER NEWS
nlundeen@greenvillenews.com

Greer city limits could become tighter knit with commercial and residential projects filling in vacant spaces if the City Council approves proposed changes to a zoning ordinance.

The council could give final approval Dec. 11 to the planned development ordinance that would reduce the minimum size of mixed-use developments, such as commercial and residential, to one acre.

"When you require large land areas for a PD (planned development), that encourages urban sprawl, and by us reducing the land areas required for PD it will actually encourage higher density closer in," City Administrator Ed Driggers said.

Greer already sprawls. Its land mass has more than tripled since the 1990s, mostly through annexation. It stretches from the Lake Robinson area on the north to below Interstate 85 to the south.

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Planned development projects and major changes to them need the city's approval, said Glenn Pace, planning and zoning coordinator.

"A PD does require more steps for a developer to do. However, it does give us more approvals in those steps," Pace said.

Mayor Pro Tem Joe Baldwin said, "I think it would allow some commercial development to occur that we otherwise might not be willing to approve."

Developers also would be required to estimate the impact on city resources. For example, the Planning Commission or City Council could determine whether a project would work with the current level of police and fire protection, Pace said.

The changes also would require that when certain thresholds are met, developers must conduct traffic impact studies before project approval rather than after approval.

On that aspect, Angela Viney, director of sustainable communities for Upstate Forever, said, "To do that beforehand to me makes common sense, but unfortunately not only in the Upstate but around the state and probably in many parts of the country it's not done. But yet it makes perfect sense to me."

Greer developer David Black said he would want to know whether doing traffic studies up front has been successful in other communities.

Developer Chuck Langston said that he's probably OK with the ordinance changes as long as everything is spelled out and developers know what is expected of them.

Traffic studies can cost about \$3,000, said Pace, and would be reviewed by the city's engineers.
