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Upstate Forever lobbies lawmakers for conservation

CHRISTINE BOUSH, Staff Writer

Gov. Mark Sanford's proposal to add an extra \$20 million to the state budget to support the South Carolina Conservation Bank is getting support from Upstate Forever.

About 30 volunteers and staff from the regional nonprofit organization were in Columbia Tuesday to lobby for the extra funding and for other conservation issues. The group promotes "sensible growth" and the protection of green spaces in the area.

Angela Viney, director of the Spartanburg office of Upstate Forever, said the lobbying effort also focused on legislation concerning the embattled state Department of Transportation and the controversial topic of regulatory takings.

Viney said there are few conservation

lobbyists compared to those focused on business and industry legislation.

"There are only about six paid lobbyists who work on conservation issues," Viney said. "Legislature really relies on agencies, organizations and citizens to communicate about the issues."

The purpose of the state Conservation Bank is to preserve environmentally important land in the state and support land-trust organizations in purchasing land and placing conservation easements on property. In the three years since its inception, the bank has conserved 86,849 acres.

The Spartanburg Area Conservancy, Upstate Forever and the Preservation Trust of Spartanburg all received grants from the bank for conservation projects last year, said Emily Neely, project manager at Upstate Forever.

"We're hoping not just that it [Sanford's budget request] will get approved, but that the extra funding will be written into the budget for the future," Neely said.

The issue of regulatory takings is also one that directly affects Upstate Forever's goal of planned growth and controlled development. Possible legislation currently being studied would make it difficult for city and county governments to impose zoning regulations on private landowners. Local government would have to pay compensation for any changes in zoning which affect property value.

"Essentially, someone could decide to sell their residential property to a factory like Hormel to farm pigs," Neely said. "It would prohibit any kind of planning for future growth because landowners can do whatever to their property regardless."

Opponents of the legislation contend that it would also put historic buildings and properties in jeopardy because local governments could no longer mandate their protection.

The Upstate lobbyists also focused on legislation that would increase the level of accountability the Department of Transportation faces in constructing new roadways.

"It makes a huge impact that we take the time and effort to drive all the way down and let them know how we want them to vote," said Viney. "This is our opportunity to educate them on issues and the local benefits."

On May 8, various local conservation agencies plan to join together to lobby on what is being billed as Annual Conservation Day.

"Legislators need someone to do the homework for them because they have so many issues to deal with they can't be up on everything," Neely said.

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