Controversy rages over 'AgRes'

Planning Commission chairman says his idea was misused

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL



WALHALLA — Jean Jennings and the McMahan family feel they've been pigeonholed into a zoning classification that did not exist when they initially petitioned rezoning in Oconee County.

Jennings and the McMahans wanted the Traditional Rural District — the least restrictive of all zoning classifications. County Council, on the recommendation of the Planning Department, gave them instead a more restrictive, newly created Agricultural Residential District.

After obtaining emails from county officials related to their North Fairview petition through a Freedom of Information Act request, Jennings and the McMahans think they

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What do the records say?



Friday: Locals are not alone in believing that civil conspiracies can take place.



Saturday: Did county officials cross the line to help private interests effect change?

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are the victims of an orchestrated effort by members of Advocates for Quality Development Inc. to influence county officials against granting their original request.

Jennings wrote on Aug. 11, 2010, to then Council Chairman Reg Dexter of her concerns about the creation of the new AgRes zoning district.

"To come right to the point, we are afraid that once the Agricultural Residential form is approved, it will be used in place of the Traditional Rural form," Jennings wrote. "The AQD have been very aggressive in support of the Agricultural form, and this causes us to worry."

Planning Commission Chairman Ryan Honea shares in the outrage Jennings and the McMahans feel with the way their petition played out.

Honea said Wednesday that he came up with the AgRes idea, but never intended it to be applied to the North Fairview request.

"When I read the emails, I felt I had been suckered into this," Honea said. "If you go through the series of emails, I think (AgRes) was thought about, but I was never told it was being thought of for Ms. Jennings."

Honea said the Planning Commission twice voted unanimously to give Jennings and the McMahans what they wanted.

"I don't know what else we

To read the emails and atta



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Ryan Honea, chairman of the Oconee County Planning Commission, pets a few donkeys kept at a home near Pine Grove Road in Fair Play. Honea said he had such homes in mind when he came up with the idea for an Agricultural Residential zoning district.

'I felt I had been suckered into this,' Honea said



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Ryan Honea of Fair Play shows the small-scale crop production he had in mind when he proposed a Residential Agricultural zoning district in Oconee County. Honea, who is chairman of the Planning Commission, never thought the classification would be used in the Jean Jennings and McMahan family zoning petition.

could have done," he said.

In a written response to questions posed by The Journal, AQD President Jim Codner said Wednesday that "AQD had no knowledge of or input" to the development of the AgRes classification.

"We were as surprised as anyone when it appeared," Codner said.

Codner also spearheaded the North Cane Creek petition that overlapped with the North Fairview request.

Codner said Planning Director Art Holbrooks brought out the AgRes classification.

In an email sent by Interim County Administrator Gene Klugh to Holbrooks on May 17, 2010, the administrator asked Holbrooks to respond to a concern Jennings communicated to him in a letter.

Jennings wrote Klugh that "the North Cane Creek advocates were directly involved" in developing the planning staff's recommendation to use the AgRes district in the North Fairview request.

Holbrooks answered Klugh in an email: "I can state without hesitation that there was NO involvement from ANY outside party in the development of the decision to recommend as we did."

Dexter, who voted along with Councilmen Paul Corbeil and Archie Barron to apply AgRes to Jennings and the McMahans, explained his decision to The Journal on Wednesday.

Dexter said he personally drove to the North Fairview petition area as he does with all rezoning requests. He said everything in the petition was rezoned Traditional Rural except for two roads where Jennings and the McMahans have their parcels.

"Those were residential," Dexter said. You could see the lake front from (the two roads)."

Dexter said the county's Future Land Use Map also designated those two road areas in yellow, or lake residential.

"The North Cane Creek petition wanted those two roads as Lake Residential," Dexter said. "They did not get everything they wanted either."

David McMahan said at a Planning Commission meeting last week that AgRes "was forced on our community." He said the planning staff's recommendation was not approved or recommended by the Planning Commission, and was not sent back to the Commission for review after the change of zoning maps and text in the ordinance.

"In our opinion, we are legally control free," McMahan said.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685

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How transparent do you feel the county has been?

To view a comparison of zoning uses between traditional rural and ag residential go to: http://www.upstatetoday.com/index.php/2011/07/rezoning-comparison-of-uses/

chments provided by Oconee County and referred to in this story go to: http://upstatetoday.com/index.php/rezoning