

'Frivolous' delays unlikely in zoning review

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WALHALLA — Any organized effort to start a belated petition drive for a Lake Hartwell overlay should not impede Oconee County's Zoning Enabling Ordinance (ZEO) from going into effect May 1 as scheduled, a spokesman for Advocates for Quality Development (AQD) said Tuesday.

AQD President Gary Owens said he does not see a push in recent weeks for a Hartwell overlay as a stalling tactic to delay the ZEO from being implemented. Owens said the May 1 deadline is official and marks the beginning for groups to deliver petitions for rezoning in the county's "zone-free" areas.

According to Owens, any overlay petition drive, be it for Lake Hartwell

or any other interest, could go forward after May 1.

AQD has been at the forefront of a broad-based citizens initiative to create an overlay protection of lakes Keowee and Jocassee. The overlay specifically calls for a setback from the lake of 1,300 feet, a 65-foot height restriction and maximum density of not more than four units per acre.

Owens said AQD has reached out to Lake Hartwell communities to help with any petition drive, but there have been no takers.

"Our offer stands," Owens said.

Richard Hughes, who lives near Lake Hartwell, said he would like a District 5 meeting held at the earliest opportunity to assess the feasibility of a Lake Hartwell overlay.

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Hughes, who ran for the District 5 County Council seat last fall and lost to now Council Chairman Reg Dexter, said during the campaign he was often asked about a Lake Hartwell overlay district. However, he said that never led to a petition drive.

Hughes said now is the time to make amendments to the ZEO, before it becomes law in May.

"I don't believe in frivolous delays, but I think it's important to get citizen input now," Hughes said.

Hughes said that following Monday night's Planning Commission meeting, commissioners and others mentioned there is a possibility the May 1 implementation deadline could be extended.

However, Planning

Department Director Art Holbrooks said everything he's heard from Planning Commission members is that they want to wrap up the review of the ZEO as quickly as possible.

"They want to move as fast as it can," Holbrooks said. "I don't see their work dragging on."

That suits Owens of AQD just fine.

"As long as they don't mess with that date (May 1) we're OK," Owens said.

Allowing for resident input to lake overlays, specifically for Lake Hartwell, is one of the reasons that County Council, particularly Dexter, asked the ZEO be reviewed by the Planning Commission.

At last week's County Council meeting, County Attorney Tom Martin said the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Savannah District office told him USACE would honor any zoning or overlay at Lake Hartwell.

USACE Spokesman Billy Birdwell said Tuesday that there is no formal agreement between the Corps or Oconee County over zoning, adding that it "considers zoning a local issue."

Aside from giving residents an opportunity to discuss a Lake Hartwell overlay, the council also wants the Planning Commission to make sure the steps for implementing citizen-initiated rezoning are uniform and comply with state law.

Finally, council wants the Planning Commission to determine who should pay the additional costs associated with local zoning initiatives.