Increased growth to spur more protection for lakes in Oconee and Pickens

Ray Chandler/Special to the Independent-Mail
Friday, May 29, 2009

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SENECA — A conservationist says the expected development across the Upstate should mean more focus on preserving the quality of lakes in Oconee and Pickens counties.

"Land is being developed at a 5-1 ratio to population growth," says Chris Starker, who is with Upstate Forever's Clean Air and Water Program. "That can have a tremendously detrimental impact on water systems unless we take steps to protect them."

Starker spoke Thursday at a forum at the World of Energy center sponsored by the Friends of Lake Keowee Society. The focus of the forum was to urge as much public participation as possible in the revamping of the comprehensive plans of both Oconee and Pickens counties, with a particular focus on water quality.

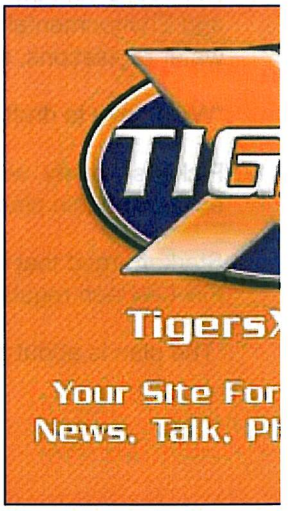
Ben Turetsky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee group, said it was critical that enough voices be heard on the issue even though neither county has downplayed the importance of the shared water resources.

"There is recognition in both counties' comprehensive plans that Lake Keowee is a valuable resource," he said.

Oconee County planners are updating their comprehensive plan and Pickens County planners are poised to begin the five-year process. The updates are required by the state.

Starker said water runoff resulting from development was the main threat to the lakes.

Buffers along lakes and streams are critical to preserving waters, he said.



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He said 25 feet is a minimum for protection, but the best control of sediment and dissolved solids comes with buffers in the 50-100 foot range, with 66 feet being a good compromise.

A recent amendment to Oconee County's zoning enabling ordinance requires 25-foot vegetative buffers as part of an overlay around Lakes Keowee and Jocassee, with provisions to ensure they are eventually installed on already developed property.

Starker favors a variety of measures to lessen the land area covered by asphalt or concrete. "One acre of asphalt had 16 times the water runoff from an inch of rain than one acre of meadow," Starker said.

The measures are also conservative in other ways, he added.

"Reducing residential street width by just four feet can save $35,000 a mile in paving," he said.

Oconee County Planning Director Art Holbrooks said storm water runoff is a factor to which the county will soon have to pay sharp attention.

"The 2010 census is expected to put … (Oconee County) over the 75,000-population trigger where we'll have to enact storm water regulations," he said.

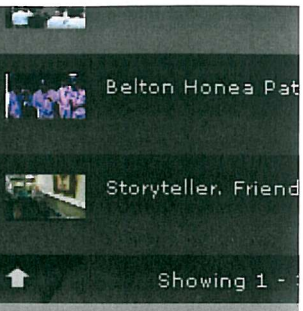
Holbrooks said the population increase would mean that the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control would require the county to take over local management of state storm water regulations, such as controlling silt runoffs from construction sites.

"We'd have to draft regulations and staff a department to enforce them," Holbrooks said.

Pickens County, with a population over 100,000, already has storm water regulations and enforcement in place.

Starker urged that in protecting waters that both the public and local government look for a good mix between regulation and incentives.

"The plan is about quality of life," he said. "And it's your plan."



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