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Lake setback stays but planning member goes

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WALHALLA — The Oconee County Planning Commission finally turned the page on an intense 24-monthlong debate on the county's first attempt at zoning, but not before one member announced his resignation from the panel Tuesday night.

District 3 Commissioner Bill Evatt, who represents Seneca, said he would turn in his resignation first thing today to County Councilman Mario Suarez, who appointed Evatt in his District.

Evatt said he was giving up his seat because he did not want to jeopardize friendships with several members on the Commission because of their sometimes heated differences over Oconee's Zoning Enabling Ordinance approved late last year and scheduled to go into effect May 1.

At the request of Commission Chairman Tommy Abbott, last night's special meeting was called to take another stab at addressing the controversial Lake Overlay District provision, and in particular, a 1,300-foot setback applied to shoreline properties at Lake Joscassee and Lake Keowee.

After every member of the Commission once again reiterated his position on the setback, District 1 Commissioner Bill Nelson attempted to abort the meeting.

"I don't know why we're having this meeting," Nelson said. "Because this is a one-issue meeting, I make a motion that we adjourn."

Evatt seconded the motion. It was defeated 4-2 with the chairman, who reserves his vote for tiebreakers, abstaining.

District 2 Commission Randy Abbott, of Walhalla, introduced a motion to shorten the setback to 500 feet. Evatt called for a recorded vote. The motion was defeated 5-1.

However, two unrelated amendments were introduced and approved.

At-Large Commissioner Howard Moore argued for making a natural vegetative buffer a requirement on all lakefront parcels within the boundaries of the Lake Jocassee/Keowee Overlay District and on any lakefront parcel.

According to the new provision, the buffers must be established with 24 months of the adoption of the new standards.

"The buffer is the main issue for water quality," Howard argued. His motion passed unanimously.

Commission Vice Chairman Ryan Honea also introduced an amendment submitted by County Attorney Tom Martin that basically complies with state law that protects covenants and restrictions already in place at the time that ZEO regulations go into effect.

These amendments must go before County Council for approval.