Not-so-scenic Highway 11

When does a highway designated as scenic by the federal and state governments cease to live up to its name and lose the title?

Is it when more than one junkyard mars its roadside? Does the balance tip when houses along the asphalt ribbon are abandoned or become run down? What if it is just strip malls or tourist-themed businesses in the foreground against a backdrop of forest and mountains? What if the outlines of factories outnumber fields of wildflowers?

These are questions that apply to Scenic Highway 11 as it runs across the top of Oconee County. The highway's route runs from the Georgia border, passing through Oconee, Pickens, Greenville, Spartanburg and Cherokee counties before ending at Cowpens, near the North Carolina line. Nowhere else along the hilly path does it contain as much industry, commercialization or unsightliness — with the possible exception of Chesnee in Spartanburg County — as it does on its run across Oconee.

At some point in its past, Oconee County forgot about Highway 11. Development occurred without a plan. Former county officials shirked their responsibility to regulate its appearance. A hodgepodge of this, that and whatever has been the result.

The road is home to many of the county's leading industries, including this newspaper's printing facility. We love our industries and want more. Nicely maintained industries that employ tens or hundreds of residents have their own beauty. But are they supposed to go on a highway called "scenic?"

It is quite possible that the time for taking action to make Scenic Highway 11 be what it is called may be past. The South Carolina Scenic Highway Committee will be reviewing Highway 11's status in September. Revoking the designation is a real possibility. If not, stern words of warning will certainly be issued.

Our elected leaders — including county council and the legislative delegation — should get together and develop a plan for the highway's use. Make it truly scenic or end the charade. Either way, a land use plan that recognizes what is already present but doesn't get queasy about the future will have to be enforced.

Our Mountain Lakes Region is known for its beauty, but like youth, beauty is easily lost. Oconee County needs to figure out whether it cares.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Saturday, July 31, the 212th day of 2010. There are 153 days left in the year.

On this date:

1777, the Marquis de Lafayette, a 19-year-old French nobleman, was made a major-general in the American Continental Army.

1875, the 17th president of the United States, Andrew Johnson, died in Carter County, Tenn., at age 66.

1919, Germany's Weimar Constitution was adopted by the republic's National Assembly.

1948, President Harry S. Truman helped dedicate New York International Airport (later John F. Kennedy International Airport) at Idlewild Field.

1964, the American space probe Ranger 7 reached the moon, transmitting pictures back to Earth before crashing onto the lunar surface.

1969, the American space probe Mariner 6 flew by Mars, sending back images of the Red Planet.

1970, "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" came to an end after 14 years as co-anchor Chet Huntley signed off for the last time; the broadcast was renamed "NBC Nightly News."