Oconee County councilmen get earful this week about controversial zoning decision

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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FAIR PLAY — "I just want to know why y'all did us this way."

Jean Jennings words were some of the in-your-face comments four members of the Oconee County Council endured at a town hall forum this week.

Out of their usual comfort zone in Council Chambers at Pine Street in Walhalla, councilmen politely listened to the woman in her 70s who has become the symbol of opposition to the county's zoning practices.

Jennings spoke in a strong voice that could be heard clearly without a microphone at the local community center that was well attended for an opportunity to fire questions at their elected officials.

The event was the first of several such meetings to be scheduled with council at different venues in the coming months.

Jennings narrated how she and more than 80 percent of property owners in her North Fairview community had signed a petition to be rezoned into the Traditional Rural District.

Instead, what they got was a more restrictive agricultural residential designation that did not even exist when they had filed their petition.

"You all cannot do this in the middle of the stream," Jennings said facing councilmen.

Another Fairview property owner, David McMahan, also challenged council's decision.

"You disrupted our community's way of life," McMahan said during his turn at the podium.

McMahan brought a sheet of paper that lists what he could do and not do on his property under the forced zoning designation.

"My understanding is that agricultural production and livestock are not permitted," he said.

"This comes from the Planning Department right here," McMahan added, pointing at the list of permitted and non-conforming uses.

Councilman Paul Corbeil engaged McMahan for several minutes as he tried to clear up what he called "a lot of misinformation" being circulated.

Corbeil said that any activity that property owners in Fairview are engaged in is grandfathered and they could continue doing what they have in the past.

"I can go and lay out my eight acres of field for my corn this year?" McMahan asked.

"Yes, if you've been doing it, then you're allowed to continue doing that," Corbeil said.

"If I can continue to do this, then why is there a paper that says that someday I can't?" McMahan rebutted.

McMahan added: "When you dabble into people's lives on how they can use their land, I think that's gone way out of hand. When you question the planting of crops, that's a terrible thing. I do not understand that."

The audience applauded as McMahan left the podium.

This week, The Journal joined McMahan and his wife, Michelle, in a Freedom of Information Act request asking council members past and present for electronic documents on their personal computers related to Fairview and North Cane Creek zoning petitions.

The McMahans and Jennings suspect that non-governmental organizations such as Advocates for Quality Development and Friends of Lake Keowee Society influenced council's decision on their request.

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