

Opposing factions regroup on zoning

County Council revisits controversial ordinance

By CARLOS GALARZA
carlos@dailyjm.com

WALHALLA — As most writers will say, conflict thickens plot and keeps readers' eyes riveted.

The new Oconee County Council majority's wish to revisit Oconee's Zoning Enabling Ordinance less than three months before it goes into effect is brewing conflict and has many eyes riveted on Pine Street.

Once again the issue is pitting an anti-zoning faction, opposed to land use regulations, against groups who want land-use rules and overlays to protect lakes and carve out industrial pockets.

The drama will continue to unfold Monday night when the Planning Commission meets. Although not on the agenda, Planning Department Director Art Holbrooks thinks an ordinance approved on first reading this week in title only to amend the ZEO will come up under new business. Also, the issue likely will be addressed during the Commission's public comment session.

PANDORA'S BOX?

The zoning controversy was reignited Jan. 27 during a workshop by the County Council's Planning and Economic Development Committee, headed by Council Chairman Reg Dexter.

Dexter explained at the workshop that as the ZEO stands now, come May 1 when it is scheduled to go into effect,

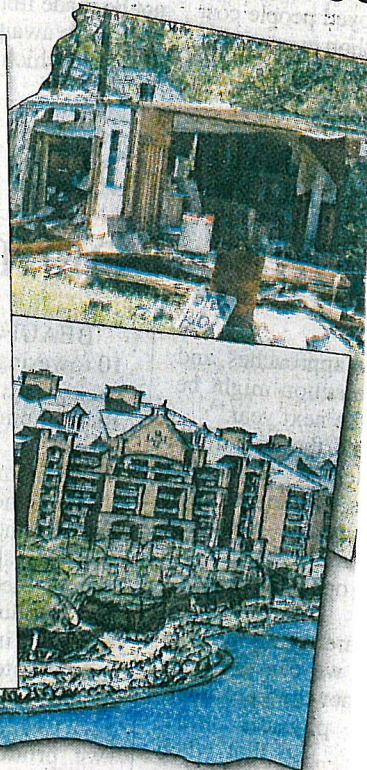
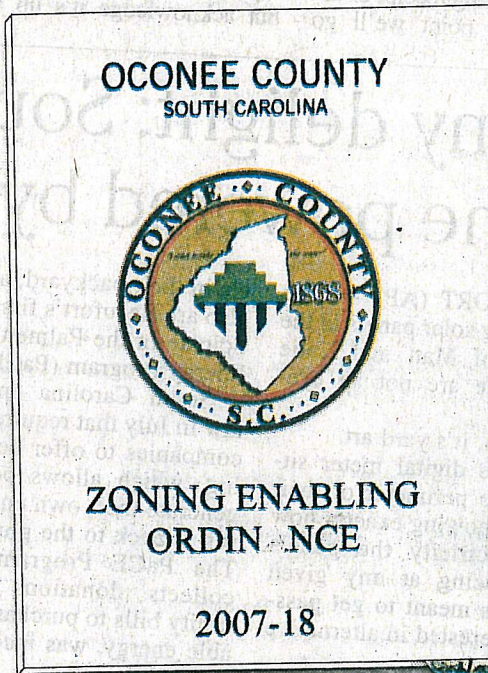
Oconee County becomes a "free zone," meaning it stays as is except for two overlays related to lakes Keowee and Jocassee and an I-85 industrial zone.

From that starting point, any citizen action for land use regulations would be a rezoning, Dexter said.

"I'm very much in favor of citizen-

initiated zoning, but when you go to that method, it doesn't follow state law," Dexter said.

Councilman George Blanchard, who spearheaded the previous council majority's push for a ZEO, asked County Attorney Tom Martin if what Dexter was saying was true. Martin



said procedural steps spelled out in the ZEO for the first method of rezoning (Planning District Initiated by Citizens), were not spelled out in Method 2 (Small Area Rezoning) or Method 3 (County Initiated). The procedural steps for the latter two methods would need to be added.

However, Dexter did not stop with just a review of the procedures for rezoning property. As long as the ZEO was being revisited, he and fellow newcomers Wayne McCall and Joel Thrift are asking that the methods required for enacting overlay districts be reviewed and that the method of funding zoning administration also be looked into. (See related story.)

PLOT THICKENS

The discussion at the workshop spilled into accusations that the previous council turned a deaf ear to some recommendations by the Planning Commission and that not all people's voices were heard.

Anti-zoning forces expressed a similar sentiment last November, just prior to Council approval of the ZEO. At that session, they called for more study, something this council had agreed to provide. By the same token, opponents of the plan say a vocal minority, who moved here from other places and are now calling the shots, has monopolized the zoning process.

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ZONING

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Last November, anti-zoning zealot Larry Linsin summed up the opposition stance, saying the ZEO was, "government of the lake, by the lake and for the lake."

Others, however, maintain that most members of the Planning Commission are against zoning and overlays altogether and distrust a process that sends the ZEO back to that group.

Local group Advocates for Quality Development, one of the groups admonished by zoning opponents, lost no time in responding on its Web site - "Lake Overlay Under Attack." AQD volunteers have collected more than 1,300 signatures in favor of the ZEO and overlay protection against unchecked development around Lake Keowee.

In comments made by Steve MacLeod on behalf of AQD President Gary Owens at the County Council meeting this week, the group made it clear that its support for a lake overlay remains strong and overwhelming.

MacLeod pointed out to the council that 13 percent of the almost 56,000 residential parcels in Oconee County fall within the Lake Keowee overlay.

He added that the more than 7,000 households around Lake Keowee pay 35 percent of the

If you go

What: Oconee County Planning Commission meeting

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St., Walhalla

taxes in the county and that it would behoove officials to protect the value of those homes with an overlay.

"Those not living in the overlay are not impacted one bit by the overlay and they have the freedom of choice for what protection they want where they live," MacLeod said. "They can request an overlay, to be zoned or not to be zoned. It seems like a fair outcome for all, does it not?"

Speaking on his own behalf, and not as executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society (FOLKS), Ben Turetzky told the County Council at its last meeting that too much has been made of who the real people of Oconee County are.

He said new arrivals make up 50 percent of Oconee's population and are no longer the minority.

"Just because half of us were not born here, we are not second-class citizens," Turetzky said.