Plans for future only as good as their input

Residents in Oconee, Pickens counties urged to join comprehensive plan update efforts

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SALEM — The updated comprehensive plans for Oconee and Pickens counties will be as good as the public wants to make them.

That was the sentiment expressed by a pair of Upstate environmentalists at a Thursday forum hosted by Friends of the Lake Keowee Society (FOLKS).

Chris Starker and John Tynan of Upstate Forever's Clean Air and Water Program urged some 50 attendees to get involved in the current updating of the comprehensive plans of both counties. Their appeal was seconded by FOLKS Executive Director Ben Turetzky who prefaced their comments by noting that the 2004 Oconee plan called for consideration of "county-wide zoning by 2007." FOLKS representatives used that wording on numerous occasions in pushing for a recently enacted zoning enabling ordinance.

Starker warned this audience that the plan be formulated now will not be revisited until 2019.

"We can't wait 10 years to look back on what went wrong," he said.

Starker said growth studies by Upstate Forever revealed the potential for "staggering and intimidating" land development by 2030. He said land is currently being development five times faster than the population of Oconee and Pickens counties is increasing.

The county comprehensive plans are mandated by the state. They require updating every five years and rewriting every 10 years. The update process requires that planners consider nine elements — population, natural resources, housing, land use, economic development, priority investments, transportation, community facilities and cultural resources.

"The comprehensive plan must have goals and recommendations for implementation for each of the nine areas," Starker explained. "You have to have implementation strategies or the plan will go on a shelf and collect dust."

The Upstate Forever representatives focused on three areas where citizens can provide input that will protect natural resources. He encouraged them to urged low impact development, buffer zone protection and restoration and watershed protection.

On the topic of development, Starker noted that neither Pickens nor Oconee County received passing grades when there plans and existing standards were inventoried for low impact initiatives.

"The biggest problem is there are no development standards," Starker said. "The good thing about that is, it's easy to fix. Get some standards."

Regarding buffers, he said typical 25-foot buffers are not good enough.

"Fifty feet is too small," he said. "We need to get to that middle zone; at least 66 feet."

Starker said there were a number of positive steps that can be taken that are also developmentally friendly, and urged people to visit the Upstate Forever Web site to obtain more information.

Above all, however, he said going to Planning Commission meetings, offering suggestions and volunteering to get involved are crucial. He noted that the first draft of the revised natural resources language of the new Oconee Plan has been written, adding that the Commission is scheduled to meet again on June 8.

"The comprehensive plan is on the agenda," he said.

Pickens County is just beginning the update process. Pickens residents were offered participation applications.