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Public gets last chance to speak up on zoning changes

Lake Overlay District buffer, setback still hot-button issues

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WALHALLA — Opponents and supporters of proposed changes to Oconee County's Zoning Enabling Ordinance have one last chance to sound off before the ZEO becomes law May 1.

The Oconee County Council will entertain public comments beginning at 5 this afternoon on the amendments hammered out so far. Acting Administrator Beth Hulse said Monday that two hours have been set aside for comments, if needed.

Country Council holds its second regular meeting of he month at 7 tonight, but won't take any new action on Ordinance 2009-03, which amends the ZEO. A third and final reading of the ordinance is set for May 5.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter said council members would have almost two weeks to consider comments by the public before taking final action.

Last week, County Council took action during the second reading of Ordinance 2009-03 that left factions on both sides of the zoning fence unhappy.

For starters, the council voted to eliminate the retroactive nature of an amendment calling for a 25-foot vegetative buffer around the Lake Overlay District. The original proposal came from the Planning Commission, but County Attorney Tom Martin said such retroactive wording was in conflict with other parts of the ZEO that contains grandfathering provisions. It was Martin's opinion that to mandate the 25-foot vegetative buffer retroactively would invite litigation.

However, as the buffer

ZEO

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provision stands, if a grandfathered property is sold, or if an addition is made on the property, then a vegetative buffer would be required.

Supporters of the Lake Overlay District were disappointed too when County Council voted to trim the 1,300-foot setback away from the lake shores to 750 feet. Critics say the new setback distance is not enough to prevent the lakes from being adversely affected by high-rise developments.

The anti-zoning faction sees the new distance as a compromise. Opponents of the setback called the original 1,300-foot setback an affront to property owners. The 65-foot height restriction on new development was left unchanged.

Oconee began working on a zoning-enabling ordinance in March of 2007. The ZEO was approved late last year and is to go into effect May 1.