Talk of an overlay surfaces amid imminent boom

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

Scenic Highway 11 in the cross-hairs

WALHALLA — Major projects about to burst on the scene along SC Highway 11 in Oconee County are expected to revive discussions about the creation of a scenic highway zoning overlay.

Highway 11 has a rich history. Also known as the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway, the 112-mile road was part of the storied "Trail of Tears" taken by the Cherokee Indians and also used extensively by English and French fur traders.

Travelers with three hours on their hands can make their way through the Upstate on the Foothills Highway and catch a view of the southernmost [illegible] Blue Ridge Mountains that the Cherokee called the "Great Blue Hills of God."

The highway begins its trajectory as an intersection off Interstate 85 in southern Oconee County and reaches its northern end in Gaffney. In between, the route is surrounded by peach orchards, quaint towns and cities, rivers, lakes and parks.

Some of the sights along Highway 11 in Oconee, however, are not so pleasing to the eye. Over the years, state Scenic Highway Commission inspections along 11 in Oconee have been negative and there has been talk the county could actually lose its "scenic highway" designation.

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Oconee County officials are considering reviving dialogue on establishing a Scenic Highway Overlay with development standards on Highway 11.



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Imminent sewer projects on Highway 11 that would likely bring more homes and businesses to the area are reviving calls for a Scenic Highway Overlay in Oconee.

HIGHWAY: Advocates point to Mission Statement

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One state official reported finding "strip-type commercialization and development" that runs contrary to the scenic designation.

Now, with the imminent development of the firs phase of the Echo Hills industrial park on Highway 11, and the recent agreement between Oconee County and the county school district to partner on a sewer project to serve the new Walhalla High School at Picket Post, fears that growth will overtake and obliterate what's left of the scenic designation are mounting.

Scenic highway advocates point to Oconee's Mission Statement that talks about protecting the environment and managing growth "through smart, inclusive planning." They argue that the county has made a commitment to offer its citizens today and in the future a "vibrant community guided by rural traditions and shaped by natural beauty." Those words are incorporated in Oconee's Vision Statement and again in the county's Comprehensive Plan.

Others say Highway 11 is what it is — a busy thoroughfare attractive to businesses eager to take advantage of traffic just as is done on Highway 123 from Greenville through Clemson and Seneca and on to Westminster.

Any attempt to find common ground on establishing a scenic highway overlay in Oconee is complicated by equally entrenched positions among those who embrace "managed growth" and others who are staunch defenders of personal property rights.

The scenic highway overlay idea surfaced with the advent of Oconee's zoning enabling ordinance in 2008, but was pulled from the ZEO, some say, for political expediency.

County Administrator Scott Moulder confirmed that his staff started researching how other communities have dealt with the scenic highway issue and has looked at some models.

"Some are crazy about requirements and others are loose with minimal requirements," Moulder said. "We want ... minimum requirements. We'd like to have design standards along the main corridor."

Moulder said public involvement and engagement would be key to finding common ground and coming up with a solution with which all sides can live.

"We want to make sure people know we are not trying to shove something down their throats," he said.

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