SC HIGHWAY 11



Scenic or sullied?

State review looming for Oconee byway

BY ANDREW MOORE
THE JOURNAL

FAIR PLAY — When Oconee County Council Chairman Reg Dexter drives from his home near Interstate 85 into the rest of Oconee County, he exits onto a ramp that takes him to Highway 11. From then on, he travels a federal- and state-designated scenic byway, though he laments that it doesn't seem like one.

"As soon as you come up on the ramp onto 11, off to your right is a very scenic fireworks stand, a defunct gas station with its light fixtures falling over and a real estate office," Dexter said. "If someone from out of state gets off I-85 on Exit 1, their first impression would be, 'This is what South Carolina refers to as a scenic highway?'"

The county council previous to the one Dexter currently chairs did away with a zoning overlay on SC Highway 11 that would have restricted what kind of development could take place there.

"There's very little the state can do as far as any kind of regulation," Dexter said. "It's really left up to the counties to take some kind of step forward."

Two years ago, the South Carolina Scenic Highway Committee reviewed SC 11 along with other roads classified as scenic byways by the state. Michael Covington, the South Carolina Department of Transportation's representative on the committee, confirmed Thursday that such reviews would begin again in September.

"Their comments two years ago were that they felt this is a real questionable scenic designation," Dexter said. "If someone came and reviewed it today, we wouldn't get it."

Dexter believes it might simply be too late now to make a feasible push for zoning on Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway, otherwise known as SC 11. Covington said Thursday his office had dealt with at least one complaint of a junkyard operation on the highway, and that prior concerns over Oconee's stretch of Highway 11 centered on billboards and commercial development.

"Certain parts of a highway can be eliminated from the designation," Covington said. "That has been done in several places in the country."

The Scenic Highway Committee has to make a recommendation to the legislature for de-designation, which then has to vote for the removal. If such action were taken, de-designation at the federal level would almost certainly follow.

"SCDOT would notify



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Reg Dexter
Oconee County Council chairman

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the U.S. Department of Transportation that the state designation had been removed," Covington said. "It's almost a slam dunk at that point."

In September, the committee will be evaluating if Highway 11 still holds "intrinsic values" that make it scenic, such as panoramic views, forests, water features and controlled development.

Dexter said staving off de-designation would not only take a zoning overlay, it could take a good chunk of money to cover existing eyesores with shrubbery and trees. The battle over restricting development, he said, may very well be over.

"I almost think it's too late," he said. "Planning Commission has a lot of problems with zoning right now, let alone an overlay."

Covington made no statements Thursday regarding the possible status of SC 11 but said general deal breakers on scenic designation were graffiti and uncontrolled growth.

"I'd be very pleasantly surprised if we were still a scenic highway," Dexter said of the looming review, "almost to the point that I'd be shocked."

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Council members see different uses for land along Highway 11

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — A tug-o-war among Oconee County Council members might be looming over how to use approximately 408 acres on SC Highway 11 the county wants to buy.

Council is expected Tuesday night to approve on second reading an ordinance authorizing the purchase of three parcels on Highway 11, a state- and federal-designated scenic highway. Councilman Mario Suarez would like to see the land used for county recreation purposes.



Suarez

Suarez chairs council's Real Estate, Facilities and Land Management Committee and says a county recreational facility is overdue. However, Councilman Wayne McCall indicated Thursday he would be ready to push back against using the land for anything other than heavy industry.

"The land is pretty much flat and that's what heavy industry wants," McCall said. "Heavy industry pays the taxes."

Suarez, who decided not to seek re-election, said he would use the remainder of his term to push hard for a county recreational center at the property through his committee.

Councilman Paul Corbeil said he agrees with Suarez that the county needs more recreational opportunities for its youths. He said

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The stretch of SC Highway 11 in southern Oconee County seen above is considered a scenic byway.
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