Zoning petitions in neutral

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WALHALLA — Oconee County's inability to move forward on overlapping rezoning requests that involve more than 300 properties near Lake Keowee is frustrating residents and county officials alike.

Petitions filed by Jean Jennings on behalf of property owners in the Fairview and Ebenezer communities and by Jim Codner representing homeowners along the Cane Creek basin have been stuck in neutral for more than six months.

Codner's rezoning request would, for the most part, have parcels designated Lake Residential, one of the more restrictive rezoning options available. Jennings and those signing her petition want to be rezoned Traditional Rural.

Over the last six months, the petitions have been debated before the County Council and County Planning Commission.

Ordinances containing both petitions came before County Council on Aug. 17 for second reading. No vote was taken.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter said at the meeting that the requests were being sent back to the Planning Commission at the request of Commission Chairman Tommy Abbott.

Jennings is beginning to feel like a pawn in a chess game.

"It's affected me," she said. "I have a problem sleeping."

Part of Jennings' frustration is her difficulty trying to understand the process. She said the planning commission voted to recommend her petition and associated map as being dominant over Codner's request.

Jennings said she could not understand why the planning department presented other maps to the one recommended by the commission.

She also said she was bothered by comments Dexter made to her in private during a recess.

Jennings said Dexter pointed at an image of the county's Future Land Use Map projected on the wall and told her that if zoning is not done according to the map, he could be put in jail.

"It embarrassed me," Jennings said of Dexter's comments.

Dexter said Friday it was a misunderstanding.

"I told her it's not a regulatory map, but that the intent of the legislature guides me," Dexter said.

Dexter said the planning department is doing its job when it brings alternative recommendations that are based on Oconee's Comprehensive Plan and Future Land Use Map.

Planning Department Director Art Holbrooks said the planning staff is required to make a recommendation on zoning requests based on what is established in the Comprehensive Plan, the Future Land Use Map "and sound planning principles."

Abbott said he requested to have the petitions brought back to the planning commission because of concerns Jennings expressed to him.

Abbott said Jennings indicated to him that she might make changes to her petition.

Codner said that the commission's recommendation to make Jennings' map dominant "is not the way I'd like to see it."

Abbott said he was unsure whether the petitions would be on the commission's agenda for the Sept. 13 meeting.

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