

Zoning remains thorny political issue in

Pending lawsuit symbolizes its divisiveness

Oconee County

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WALHALLA — Ben Turetzky had little interest in politics when he moved to Oconee in fall 1994.

A longtime Michelin executive, Turetzky continued to work with the company after moving to the area. He would commute to Michelin in Greenville.

After retiring in late 1999, Turetzky became involved in the local scene.

David McMahan, one of the plaintiffs, comes from a family that has owned rural property near Lake Keowee for more than 100 years.

McMahan's request to have his property zoned Traditional Rural District, which he felt offered him the most permitted uses of any other zoning designation, was denied by council. In denying the request, council ignored a unanimous recommendation by the Planning Commission to give McMahan, and Jean Jennings (the other plaintiff in the case) the TRD designation they wanted.

The zoning dispute has pitted native-born residents against relative newcomers who moved around Lake Keowee to retire.

A dueling zoning petition generated by homeowners on the lake opposed McMahan and Jennings having their property zoned Traditional Rural out of fear that they would use their land in a way that would devalue their homes.

Councilman Reg Dexter, who is seeking re-election this year, is named in the zoning lawsuit. Councilman Paul

In early 2000, he joined the board of Friends of Lake Keowee Society, or FOLKS — a group dedicated to promoting and preserving the lake and its watershed as vital components to the area's economic and recreational well-being.

After serving two terms as president of FOLKS, Turetzky has been the organization's executive director for about the past five years.

Corbell also is named in the suit, but his seat is not up for election.

Planning Commission Chairman Ryan Honea, who lives in Fair Play that is part of District 5 that Dexter represents, said zoning has not been controversial in his area.

"All of the zoning petitions from District 5 have been unanimous

and have gone through smoothly," Honea said. "All of the controversy has been around the lake."

Honea is advocating a change in the rezoning petition method that would make a repeat of the Jennings-McMahan situation less likely.

The divisiveness over zoning is not keeping FOLKS quiet. Turetzky has appeared before County Council and the Planning Commission calling for commercial development standards.

FOLKS was instrumental in rallying support against a developer's plans to build a marina off Highway 130 near Salem. FOLKS successfully stopped the marina by raising safety concerns related to the narrowness and depth of the location, as well as



Turetzky is closely watching the 2012 election races for Oconee County Council. He bluntly states there are candidates running who would like to get

rid of zoning.

"One of the most important things in zoning is the lake overlay, and buffers are important things to do to protect the lake," Turetzky said. "I think zoning will come up as an issue."

Oconee implemented its zoning ordinance in May 2009. Two years later, two property owners slapped the county with its first zoning lawsuit.



FILE PHOTO

Zoning disputes triggered by petitions filed by property owners on Lake Keowee are expected to surface in races for Oconee County seats.

increased boat traffic.

Turetzky said reasonable commercial development standards, as previously introduced by Planning Commission member Andrea Heller, would safeguard against marinas opening with no regulations on buffers, noise and lighting. Heller also is named in the zoning lawsuit.

"The county planning act talks about the importance of the lakes and mountains around us as a cornerstone for the economic health of the Upstate," Turetzky said. "(County officials) have an obligation to protect property values of long existing residential developments against commercial development around the lake."