

Pickens County Council approves Highway 11

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS — By a 5-1 vote, with Alex Saitta in opposition, Pickens County Council recently passed third and final reading of an ordinance protecting the S.C. Highway 11 area from unmanaged growth while also protecting private property rights of homeowners in single-family homes.

Those protections include a natural setback of 150 feet on each side of the highway, signage limitations and watershed protections, while also allowing for a conservation bank so the county can purchase perpetual easements from private landowners for historic or natural preservation. The ordinance also does not allow heavy industry.

"Currently there isn't anything, so what we were looking to do was put something in place to protect personal property rights," council vice chairman Roy Costner said. "The compromise is we don't want to tell you what you can do with the land, but if you're going to be within that watershed or within that range we've described, let's be frugal with it, let's take care of it."

But Saitta said he believes the ordinance creates a misconception that Highway 11 in Pickens County will remain "scenic, pristine and beautiful." Instead, he said it "allows new manufacturing, new commercial and new subdivisions all along the highway."

"I think that section of Highway 11 will look like what Oconee County has become, and that's unfortunate," Saitta said. "I think the plan does very little, actually. It allows manufacturing, it allows commercial, we'll have subdivision developments all along the highway. It really just controls the looks of those things. The dollar stores will come in time, they'll just look like a tree. I'm beginning to see storage warehouses, they're just going to look like the side of a mountain."

Saitta added the ordinance allows commercial development "all along Highway 11" and "at six intersections up close to the road." He added that it would allow restaurants and commercial buildings up to three and a half stories high.

"It's really sad that in 25 years you're going to look back and not recognize this place," Saitta said.

Councilman Trey

Whitehurst disagreed.

"Nobody's going to put a 200,000-square-foot facility in 1,000 feet — the idea of this light industrial being a 200,000-square-foot carpet building in a 1,000-foot barrier is just not possible," Whitehurst said. "So it's a little weak on the scare tactics. Right now there are no restrictions, so I believe that having a buffer and having some property rights behind that is a fair compromise."

Councilman Henry Wilson said "there's no line to be drawn when it comes to protecting people's property rights."

"We're not going to get perfection, but we're going to take an action that's going to be meaningful in the lives of our children, our grandchildren and we're going to do it by holding the line against stepping on people's property rights," Wilson said. "None of us on this board is going to get 100 percent of what we

want — none of us."

Council discussion and action followed more than 30 minutes of public comment. Several complaints were issued that the ordinance was not made available by the county until hours prior to the meeting, allowing little time for review.

"A lot of people affected by these limits and restrictions are people that purchased or inherited land and did so as unrestricted — that's a big deal," Matt Chappell said. "I've lived there for 45 years and would hate for any of the picturesque views to be marred by any development. But what I hate more is seeing that so many people are so willing to give up other people's rights to save that view."

Kevin Keller said that while he appreciates council's efforts, the S.C. Highway 11 corridor in question "is too diverse for a one-size-fits-all approach."

regulations

"Council has tried to make everyone happy with this ordinance and has ended up allowing almost everything as long as it looks pretty enough in some future planner's evaluation," Keller said. "I believe the people wanting to make commercial money on their strip of land on 11 and the big money interests looking to build up there will not put respect for the area or the residents above the dollar. I'm concerned that we will soon end up with a mess — an attractive mess, but

a mess the same."

County administrator Ken Roper thanked council for its action on a hot-button issue.

"Thank you for the hard work you've done over the past year to get us to this point," Roper said.

Councilman Ensley Feemster said the ordinance can be tweaked if deemed necessary.

"We can improve on it once we get it out there and people see what's in it," Feemster said.

goliver@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6687