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Horry County builders invited to be more green

Panel OKs voluntary measures

By Claudia Lauer
clauer@thesunnews.com

Horry County took a step closer Tuesday to a measure in the works since 2007 that would create a greener option for land developers seeking to build near wetland.

An ad-hoc committee formed by the Horry County Council Infrastructure and Regulations Committee approved changes to a proposed conservation subdivision ordinance, sending the revised ordinance back to the council committee for approval on March 3 and jogging forward a process that started in November 2007. The ordinance would be voluntary for developers and would offer incentives for maintaining usable green space and keeping vegetated buffers along wetland.

Some committee members and others argue the voluntary ordinance does not go far enough in protecting the natural characteristics of the county. For others, the ordinance would be a first step in what they hope will eventually be a second nature consideration for the county's remaining green areas. There are also those sitting in the middle of the two camps, looking to the ordinance as a test for what will happen in the future, a canary in the coal mine for conservation efforts.

"This is a win-win situation. We win if developers utilize it. We win if they don't," said Christine Ellis, Waccamaw Riverkeeper. "If they don't use it, we win because that then begs the question, if we can't incentivize this, then you have to go mandatory. Ultimately we are trying to protect our quality of life around here."

The ordinance would offer a faster process, free from zoning approvals and three readings at council, if a developer is willing to commit 40percent of the developable land on a parcel 20 acres or bigger into preserved green space. The site plan must also include 35 feet of vegetated buffer around rivers and wetland and a plan to maintain and protect that space from encroachment.

In exchange for meeting those stipulations, developers receive several incentives including the faster, cost-effective approval process and a higher density allowance that would increase with the number of acres of buffer provided against wetland. The new ordinance places a cap on that density at 150 percent of the number of houses allowed in a normally zoned development.

For some members and people in the nonprofit world, the voluntary aspect of the ordinance causes concern.

"I watched the loopholes in these processes for 15 years. Everything that we do to encourage [developers] to do the right thing, ultimately doesn't accomplish the goal," said Pam Creech, who serves on several boards including the Zoning Board of Appeals. "I respect that all of you can sign on to this ... but I can't. I am really tired of things being signed off on in this county that are just better than nothing. I want something that is more than that in place here."

Kirt Manecke, the president and founder of the nonprofit group Land Choices, said the organization has researched conservation subdivisions and subdivision ordinances throughout the country. Manecke said studies show the voluntary ordinances aren't as effective as mandatory ordinances because there hasn't been enough education of potential developers about the benefits of conservation developments.

"The way things should be done is that conservation subdivisions are the normal development that is used, and then special zoning approval should be needed to have what we consider a regular development. Developers should have to tell zoning boards and communities why the regular developments should be built in a community," he said. "There was a study done by Wayne State University that found that conservation subdivisions are more profitable, less costly and faster-selling."

Several members of the ad-hoc committee said they are hopeful that with education and the marketable nature of green space, the ordinance will be effective.

"It's going to require some selling, and education is going to be key. The marketability is higher for this scenario, but I don't see people beating down the door to participate. If they're trying to milk whatever they can out of a property, then they'll continue to do what they're doing," said committee member Steven Neeves, government affairs director for the Coastal Carolinas Association of Realtors. "I think with education, this will attract some developers. ... [The current economy] is a great environment for us to introduce something like this."

Contact *CLAUDIA LAUER* at 626-0301.

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