

Our growing priorities

Published in the Chronicle-Independent, February 27, 2006

Two thousand nine hundred — that's the number by which Kershaw County's population increased from 2000 to 2004, for a total population of 55,491. This increase of 5.4 percent is higher than the South Carolina average growth rate of 4.6 percent, and our county is expected to continue to grow at an accelerated pace. Are we prepared to handle this growth while continuing to enjoy the quality of life that makes us proud to call Kershaw County home?

The issue brings to mind some wise words from Edmund Burke, the great British political thinker active at the time of the American Revolution. Burke observed, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." I have co-sponsored legislation in the General Assembly to give our state the means of addressing inevitable change and growth while conserving the things we love most about our communities. Earlier this month, the SC House of Representatives passed H.3881, The Priority Investment Act, to revise our existing Local Government Planning Act, which requires municipal and county governments to develop five-year comprehensive plans. This bill, as amended, adds two planning elements to the comprehensive plan: a transportation element and a priority investment element.

To comply with the priority investment element, local governments would assess what federal, state, and local funds are likely to be available for public infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, schools) over the next ten years and recommend projects for expenditure of these funds. The legislation also provides for coordination among local governments and other entities such as special purpose districts, school districts, and utilities. In Kershaw County, a planning commission would be required to notify other local governments and concerned parties and give them an opportunity to provide comment.

The legislation also encourages local governments to develop market-based incentives and reduce unnecessary housing regulatory requirements to encourage developers to build affordable housing and traditional neighborhood designs. The bill should improve the local government planning process and save taxpayer dollars by making more efficient use of public infrastructure money.

How do we pay for needed infrastructure and improvements? It is particularly important that we discuss the price tag of growth now that the General Assembly is debating reform for the way property is taxed. While I voted for the House property tax relief plan, I am concerned that it does not leave local governments with adequate means of raising revenue. Without the ability to raise revenue locally, city and county government could be powerless to respond effectively to needs the local citizens want addressed, rendering us unable to say how we grow.

As a state representative, I respect the doctrine of home rule and believe that government closest to the people governs best. The functions of local services, land use, zoning, and economic development are traditionally, and rightfully, left to the discretion of local governments. It is their responsibility to identify needs, pass local ordinances, and develop incentives that address growth issues. We are, however, well served to step back and identify certain key concerns that all our local governments should take into account when planning for the future. The Priority Investment Act encourages local governments to coordinate their activities so that we might experience growth that is deliberate and welcome rather than haphazard and wasteful.

Camden presents its own special considerations, including how we are to preserve our unique historical and cultural assets while accommodating growth. Fortunately, Camden has well-defined residential and business areas. Investors and developers ought to be encouraged to direct efforts towards these identified areas where growth is desired and cost-effective. We also have many existing neighborhoods that can be revitalized, spurring economic growth where it is needed most. Additionally, our transportation systems, so crucial in providing economic opportunities, should be enhanced to ensure the continued viability of all neighborhoods.

Here in Kershaw County, I hope that, in ten or twenty years, we will have no reason to look back and wonder what we might have done differently. I hope that we'll be able to say that we had leaders with foresight who believed in the spirit of cooperation and made sure that we directed growth rather than allowing growth to direct us.