

New rules add more creative options for home shoppers

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It's hard to justify on a balance sheet why James Johnson would pay \$220,000 for a home he could get for less almost anywhere else.

Johnson paid quarter-acre prices on a tenth of an acre for the same reason one might pick a Mini Cooper over a comparably priced SUV — because space isn't everything. In essence, Johnson agreed to foot the difference, along with all his neighbors, in exchange for a central park outside his front door.

Under a sweeping new zoning law passed by the Greenville County Council, such neighborhoods are now easier to build and developers are able to get more creative, potentially including small grocery stores, townhomes, even doctors' offices within the nucleus of a specific subdivision.

It's the anti-cookie-cutter concept, but it could be a tough sell to local residents accustomed to buying into a homogenous setting and angling for the most square feet their mortgage brokers will allow. The communities also come with specific rules on what can and can't be built as part of a bigger trend toward more modern yet controlled local growth.

That idea — controlling new growth — is something residents like William Jones had never thought about until a nearby landowner asked the County Council to let him use a residential tract for unspecified commercial purposes.

"You know how things like that will run a neighborhood down," Jones said. So residents mobilized with the argument that commercial use wouldn't fit with the established residential area — that the county should act to preserve the district's integrity.

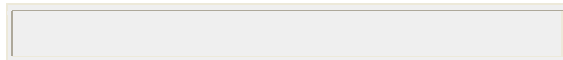
Take that argument a step further and you have the logic for a new and sweeping countywide development plan that could take shape under the new council and would more stringently define what could be built where, and how it has to be done.

Already, new zoning and development regulations were ratified at the end of a year in which even hallowed local grounds — dirt racetracks — saw new restrictions, in which prospective developers had to fight sleeper neighborhoods mobilized by growth-related flooding, in which even a Libertarian candidate for council endorsed some growth controls.

The paradox: as Greenville urbanizes, what happens on one piece of property affects more and more neighbors. Meanwhile, Americans are hibernating — choosing to stay close to home, perfecting the art of consumerism, acting less often in large community groups.



James Johnson's neighbors in Redfearn sit in their porch rockers, congregate in the park and hold block parties, a throwback to earlier decades. (Patrick Collard/Staff)



Enter the "neo-traditional" neighborhood, the all-in-one development that offers homebuyers more than just square footage and in turn requires a suspension of norms. Home shoppers throw out the notion that a small, next-door grocer will dent property values. Real estate agents throw out a tendency to pitch the biggest yards and hot tubs.

And the county throws out the obstacles to creativity, composing new rules for more palatable growth.

The revamped zoning ordinance is a first step, opening the door to such neighborhoods while not actually pushing them. A series of amendments to the county's land development regulations, meanwhile, make it more difficult to build neighborhood roads and more expensive to get them inspected because of new and higher standards.

Both new measures were buried amidst a slew of controversial, late-term measures passed by last year's council and have the effect of changing what you can do with your land and how much it will cost.

Proponents of controlled growth say the county is slowly moving in the right direction, while property rights advocates say regulating land use is a dangerous concept that smacks of bigger, more intrusive government. Still, nearly everyone agrees there's room for the county to somehow legislate more responsible growth.

The point, county staffers say, is to ensure future growth is the kind residents really want.

Retro living Johnson is all for it, for reasons he said must be experienced.

When you walk onto his front porch, roughly three-fourths of the Redfearn neighborhood is within waving distance, either just through lampposts or across the park. Driving the narrow streets between large porches and distinctive brick gables feels like stepping onto the set of an idyllic suburban TV series.

Johnson's neighbors sit in their porch rockers, congregate in the park and hold block parties, a throwback to earlier decades. And his house, purchased less than three years ago, has increased by \$30,000 in value to \$250,000, according to a recent appraisal.

Redfearn developer Jeff Randolph said his efforts to develop subdivisions in the "neo-traditional" or "new urbanist" vein have been hindered by zoning rules that forced him to legally separate adjacent properties in one local project so that a church could be zoned separately, although it still visually anchors the neighborhood.

The new zoning law allows residential developers to mix housing types without securing the more difficult "planned development" designation, which comes with county oversight throughout a project. A "neighborhood commercial" zoning designation also allows offices and retail buildings to be mixed with residential units.

Now, once developers are granted the applicable zoning change, they're free to build within specific rules that regulate the quality of all the project's components.

As long as the development's integrity is carefully controlled, Randolph said the value of new-urbanist homes can actually increase, not decrease as many people suppose.

Newly elected County Council Chairman Butch Kirven has said that's a prime reason for more deliberate and controlled growth countywide — because what one person builds now affects a wider range of neighbors.

Protecting property rights now entails sticking to a common plan, he said, which enhances everyone's property values.

Randolph said mixed-use neighborhoods aren't any cheaper to develop, but the properties sell quicker because there's more variety.

Still, "If you said we're going to have a grocery store right here at the entrance, most (homebuyers) would freak out," Randolph said.

It's one reason he's mounted a huge advertising blitz for Verdmont, a new subdivision near Simpsonville that offers even more dramatic amenities than Redfearn, while stopping short of true neo-traditional design.

"I'm going to charge him the same thing, and he's going to get a smaller lot," Randolph said of his buyers. "But what I am doing is, right across the street, I'm giving him a park."

In the future, add a general store, school and a dry cleaner, and you have a whole new shopping option.

"I'm not sure you're ever going to convince everyone it's good to have a grocery store next door," said Jimmy Forbes, the director of the county Planning Commission. Still, the trend toward what he calls "walkable communities" is being driven by builders and buyers.

Converts growing The new land development regulations, passed separately from the zoning law, mean tougher restrictions and higher fees to build subdivision infrastructure, and could effect higher home prices.

Since most developers build neighborhood roads that are eventually deeded to the county, new standards for asphalt and road construction are designed to make sure the roads last 15-20 years before the county has to use taxpayer money to repair them, said Paula Gucker, assistant county administrator for public works.

Existing local roads were also given new classifications, most of which mean that subdivisions built alongside those roads will face new and costlier entrance and exit requirements, for example, Gucker said.

There are also multiple new fees for getting a subdivision's infrastructure inspected and reviewed, changes she said are meant to make the process go faster and smoother.

The new zoning ordinance fosters more neighborhood green space by allowing developers to use floodplains for recreation areas and mix multi-family units with single-family residences, an approach called "clustering."

In these cases, the number of homes allowed per acre remains the same although lot sizes can be smaller, which opens up additional open areas within the neighborhoods, said John Owings, the Planning Commission's manager of current planning.

Owings said some new homes could be cheaper as a result, since neighborhoods can be built with less overall infrastructure and there's less ongoing oversight than developers were used to under the "planned development" designation.

Butch Taylor, president of the Greenville County Taxpayers Association and a longtime advocate of property rights, said he's wary of sweeping development regulations because of a big-government trend toward taking away individual freedoms and dictating a one-world agenda.

Still, he said it's clear some local developers are "raping" the land, and neighborhood floods are an all-too-painful result. To foster more responsible development, he said some additional regulations are needed, though he would favor a time limit on new restrictions so they can be scaled back in the future.

With the specter of an unsightly neighborhood business weighing on his mind, Jones said planning the quality of growth on the front end sounds good. "That would be fine with me," he said.