

Speakers urge broader review of big development impact

Goal: Clean air, water and sane building rules

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A passionate chorus urged Mecklenburg County policymakers Thursday to begin broad assessments of how major development projects would affect the air, water and open space.

Forty speakers appeared at a forum hosted by the county's Environmental Policy Coordinating Council. The council, whose members serve on county boards that deal with development and environmental issues, will report to county commissioners.

Some states, including Georgia and Florida, review developments of regional impact. County staff and a regional air-quality group have recommended similar evaluations of major projects.

Many forum speakers described a landscape that's becoming most familiar for its felled trees, asthmatic children, muddy streams and packed freeways.

In the 1950s, recalled retired NationsBank employee Robert Barker, a bare eye could see mountain peaks from the top of Charlotte's new bank towers.

When the bank's 60-story headquarters opened in 1992, he said, "from the top of that build-

ing what you see is a line of gray smog on the horizon."

Jeff Steinmetz, who teaches environmental science at Queens University of Charlotte, detailed Mecklenburg's catalog of polluted streams. Most aren't safe for more than brief human contact.

The furious pace of construction, rising land prices and the irreversible effects of development make local land conservation "a race against time," added Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

Builders and developers said the county already has a wealth of building rules - too many, in some cases. Environmentalists who want the Charlotte region to work together on its problems say development rules vary among jurisdictions and often conflict.

Developer Tom Pearson said it took 2½ years to finally break ground on his 450-lot development in Huntersville, where a low-impact design ordinance protects nearby McDowell Creek.

"I know there's a lot of cry for more regulations," he said, "but we ought to stop and look at the regulations we've already got on the books."

The forum has its roots in challenges earlier this year of the 1.1 million-square-foot Northlake shopping mall under construction at Interstate 77 and Reames Road north of Charlotte.

The mall developer sought a

county air-quality permit for its 8,558 parking spaces. The Carolinas Clean Air Coalition, a regional advocacy group, said vehicle emissions would pump unhealthy doses of carbon monoxide into the air.

County staff disagreed, and issued the permit without a public hearing. But air quality director Don Willard suggested a public forum on the broader environmental issues the project raised. Coalition president Nancy Bryant asked county commissioners to make Thursday's session happen.