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Summit to help guide 'environmental cabinet'

Friday's summit at the Charlotte Convention Center will help guide a new regional "environmental cabinet" to be formed by the Centralina and Catawba Regional councils of government, which support local governments in both states.

The environment and transportation knit together the region like nothing else, said Jennifer Roberts, Mecklenburg County commissioners' chairman.

A blitz of speakers set the stage with presentations on air and water quality, waste disposal, open space and green business development. The broad themes: untapped potential and urgency for action.

GREENING THE REGION

Elected officials from nine counties and 14 cities heard a sometimes-bleak assessment of the Charlotte region's environmental challenges Friday.

Here's what speakers said about key topics:

Water quality

Land development is now the major cause of the region's water pollution, sending sediment, bacteria, metals, pesticide and oil into streams and lakes. Between 1984 and 2003, municipal areas of the region grew by 99 percent while the number of trees dropped 33 percent, said Mecklenburg water programs chief Rusty Rozzelle. Impaired waters in the Catawba River basin grew 32 percent between 1998 and 2004 alone.

Air quality

The region faces more regulatory headaches over ozone pollution, despite several years of improvement. All eight of the region's air monitoring sites will violate a new ozone standard announced

in March, said Mecklenburg air chief Don Willard. The human cost of air pollution: It causes one-third to one-half of N.C. asthma cases, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates, triggering 240,000 asthma attacks and sending 6,300 people to emergency rooms each summer.

Waste management

N.C. residents send far too much recyclable material to landfills. Just 10 counties, including Mecklenburg, account for half of the state's total waste disposal. The average N.C. household recycles only a third of the 745 pounds a year of recyclables it produces each year, said Scott Mouw of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Open space

Time is running out for local governments to preserve open space, as land values soar. What Mecklenburg residents want, according to surveys: more hiking and biking trails, and large parks, said parks director Jim Garges. What they're most willing to spend tax dollars on: preservation of green space. The reality: 20 percent of the highest-priority natural areas targeted for conservation have been lost to development since 2006, and another 30 percent loss is expected soon.