

Jim Wilson: Green space champion

Appreciation for natural resources spurs Jim Wilson's desire for greenway system in Richland County

Over the past five years, Jim Wilson helped persuade Richland County landowners to set aside more than 1,600 acres as open green space for generations to come.

Wilson, 63, has led the county's conservation program since 2006, capping off a 40-year career in natural resources. He retired Friday.

Following is more about what motivates him, conservation initiatives he'd like to see Richland County pursue, and why environmentalists and developers need to work together.



Jim Wilson, conservation director for Richland County is retiring. - caberry@thestate.com /C. Aluka Berry

"It's really a stewardship responsibility for all of us, as citizens, to recognize the natural resources we're blessed with — that were here a long time before we were. The good Lord put it here for a reason. We have a responsibility to understand our place in nature.

"We've had a successful track record of 50 tracts that are protected. Our focus has really been on smaller tracts that are right on the brink of development that could be protected.

"The northeast is a good example: We had massive clearing, a lot of houses. We had a stretch in there where we couldn't issue permits fast enough to build houses. So we were transforming the landscape into a different land use completely. I'm not saying that's wrong, but it was without the balance of natural areas and water-quality features to go with it."

Question: What are the advantages of having small green areas like that?

"Small areas provide green space between communities. They protect our streams, provide wildlife corridors and, if you really look at what long-term green space is left in Richland County, those may be some small pockets of what will be left.

"We had a lot of controversy about the buffer legislation. But the current code pretty well allowed development to come within 10 feet of a stream. Even 50 feet, instead of 10 feet, helps the county in the stormwater program. It helps the community water supply be protected long term. It actually serves as an amenity of green space.

"There is an economic answer. You don't have to clear the whole site. In most cases, if you have 200 acres and you didn't clear 50 acres — you left it completely in woods — it provides a filter to the runoff. It becomes an amenity. The developer probably could market those

houses, backing up to that green space, for even more. And the tax benefits probably would give him close to the same amount of money as if he sold those other 50 houses on 50 acres. Because he's not putting in water and sewer and streets on those 50 acres. So he reduces his development cost and he gets a tax benefit and is doing something good for his community. And he could market it that way as a 'green' development. Some developers are beginning to do that".

Question: Tick off five things that the county should be doing, but isn't, in the conservation arena.

"Protection of our prime agricultural lands, for all of us. It gets into zoning, but there can be agricultural districts where we protect that land to sustain food and fiber production over time. Even if we had to pay the farmer.

"Watershed management is essential. We need to look at a geographical area of development. That gets into zoning, that gets into protecting streams, that gets into recreational areas.

"Third, the county needs to look seriously at our natural resource treasures: Congaree National Park, the Cowasee basin — the Wateree and the Congaree floodplains. Our historic treasures, whether it be old schoolhouses or old churches. More effort to preserve historic sites in the county that mean something to communities.

"The county needs to move forward with a formal greenway system. Greenville has a good program. Beaufort has a good program. Three Rivers Greenway does a beautiful job as a starting point for greenways in the city. But the county does not have a greenway system. The citizens are asking for that. We ought to connect Fort Jackson to the national park. We ought to connect Three Rivers Greenway to Blythewood. And we can do that in a floodplain of a watershed, not high ground that ought to be developed but a floodplain that, ecology-wise, is scenic and educational.

The other piece is, there really needs to be joint development standards between the city and the county. For development and natural resources.

Question: Let's talk about what you've accomplished.

"Three areas where I feel I've contributed: Land preservation, where we've been able to at least launch a volunteer program to meet landowner objectives that also serve a common good. Historic preservation. We've got about 25 projects out there that we've funded and are helping non-profits get some restoration actually done. And then to take conservation and make it an integral part of the planning office.

Q: Development is a dirty word for some people. Conservation is a dirty word. What can be done to bring these groups together?

"We need development for economic growth. It's a form of business for Richland County. We're an urban county and we will build out. Hopefully, the recession will be over and we'll be issuing 100 permits a month for development.

"A lot of developers saw, in the past, a natural resource component of development as an obstacle. Streams or wetlands, they can't develop. It's difficult to put in roads. They've got to put in fill material. So what we see as conservation — the streams or floodplains or wet areas, even wildlife areas — were an obstacle to the development plan. Conservation shouldn't be an obstacle. It should be an amenity.

"I think the next generation will even buy more into that, but we're in a transition between the old mind and the new mind. We have to be patient."