

Column

Land conservation comes of age in Aiken County

By **STEPHEN HALE**
and **SARAH EAKIN**

Although the Aiken County Open Land Trust had amassed over 1,200 acres of protected land in Aiken County over the past 18 years, the time had come for a broader new understanding of the organization and its important mission. With the public announcement of a new name, a new logo and a new slogan this August, the organization enjoyed a rebirth under the title of Aiken Land Conservancy, (ALC).

In the planning stages, ACOLT Executive Director Dacre Stoker held several think-tank meetings with public relations consultants Sarah Eakin and Stephen Hale of Eakin-Hale Publicists. As a result of these highly productive sessions involving board members and supporters, the renamed Aiken Land Conservancy revealed its new look to community leaders and the media at roll-out events held in October at The Willcox.

The launch of the land conservancy was combined with the unveiling of the tag line, "Preserving Aiken's Natural Heritage," and a new logo to represent the organization's broad new role in conserving wetlands, watersheds, farmland, forests and open spaces. ALC also has a new website: www.conserveAiken.org

At the same event, the newly named organization installed a new president, Paul Rideout of Security Federal Bank, who took over the reins from USC Aiken professor Harry Shealy following his six years of service. Shealy was the group's third president, following local conservationists and benefactors to the land trust, Iris Freeman and Lee Dane.

"I want to thank Lee and Iris for the foundation they built before I took over," said Shealy. "Paul has been a resident of Aiken for many years and is quite an outdoorsman. Only the other day he was telling me about his kayaking ..."

Rideout said he was thrilled to take up the mantle of a cause so close to his heart. "I was lucky enough to be born



Submitted photo

Paul Rideout, from left, Lee Dane, Iris Freeman and Harry Shealy have led the Aiken Land Conservancy since it was established as Aiken County Open Land Trust in 1991.

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and raised in Aiken," said Rideout. "And I am happy to be back. I am pleased to be here and to be a part of this (ALC)."

Iris Freeman, founding president of ACOLT in 1991, and her successor Lee Dane, marked the re-launch of the group by signing documentation concerning conservation easements on their own extraordinary properties.

Ron Monahan, Freeman's partner in The Ridge at Chukker Creek – an impressive and very "green" new housing development south of Aiken – announced that a recently preserved 60-plus acres has been named the Freeman Preserve after Iris and her husband, Hall of Fame thoroughbred trainer Mike Freeman.

Lee Dane signed a letter of intent to place a conservation easement on 300 acres of her

Ridge Spring area farm that includes several streams and the North Fork of the Edisto River where huge "Civil War" hardwoods near the water will in her words "be preserved for as long as they can stand."

Stoker also read a letter from Scott Riviere stating that Freeman's influence led him to establishing an easement on his 17 prime acres along Grace Avenue in the heart of Aiken's horse district. Furthermore, Brian Sanders, recently promoted to deputy county manager, announced the placement of conservation easements on significant portions of the Langley Pond site and the former Savannah River Site recreation area.

"We all prize the beauty of our area and working together we can slow the growth of urban sprawl and preserve many of our natural treasures for our grandchildren and theirs," said Stoker.

"We all instinctively understand the intrinsic value of keeping the natural world the way it was created, but protecting land also makes good economic sense. New tax laws allow landowners to defer taxes for up to 15 years and the value of adjacent land is greatly enhanced when a conservation easement is applied to a property – just think of the value of property around Hitchcock Woods!"

Stoker urged anyone who has an interest in preserving their land, or helping others to save our natural heritage, to contact the ALC by calling 649-7139, or sending an e-mail to, mail@conserveAiken.org.