Advocates lobby for sewer in north Oconee

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Laremy Hinkle's ears perked up when he heard a few months back that the Oconee County Council had formed a Blue Ribbon Panel to recommend an action plan for putting sewer at the Golden Corner Commerce Park and the Interstate 85 corridor.

Hinkle also paid attention when council floated a priority list of capital projects with a price tag that exceeds $140 million.

Hinkle has heard the mantra mouthed by county officials — "We need jobs."

Since then, Hinkle has been showing up at county public meetings with a message of his own. He said there are development opportunities in north Oconee along the Highway 11 corridor.

Hinkle, who owns investment property in north Oconee, said there are businesses interested in commercial and retail opportunities that would bring jobs to the county right away. He said the only thing holding up development is sewer.

"I'm not against development of south Oconee County," Hinkle has said when he takes his message to county officials. "Just please don't forget about us."

Hinkle's message is resonating.

Salem Mayor Diane Head sees water and sewer expansion in her corner of the county as the key to expanding the town's tax base and annexation opportunities.

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>
> **Laremy Hinkle**
> Developer

Salem Town Clerk Kym Alexander said that in December alone three developers other than Hinkle have approached Salem officials with plans that would bring jobs to a county with 14.3 percent unemployment.

"I can't release names, but there are plans in the preliminary stages," Alexander said. "There are a number of developers and a number of others that have called our utility department. We can't release what they're working at."

Councilman Wayne McCall, whose District 2 covers part of the Tamassee area, has gotten wind of those plans and would like to see council turn its attention to bringing sewer to the northern areas, including the Highway 11 area.

McCall sees bringing infrastructure to the Salem surrounding areas where developers already are knocking on the door is much less of a gamble than spending $6.6 million on the first phase of putting sewer at the Golden Corner Commerce Park and the I-85 corridor.

Not only are the upfront costs higher for infrastructure in south county, but sewer officials have said it would cost more than $500,000 a year operating and maintaining the system whether there is one customer or 200.

Alexander said Councilman Paul Corbeil, whose District 1 also takes in part of the Salem-Tamassee area, has also been good at listening to his constituents.

She said there have been plans and studies on getting water and sewer infrastructure in the northern areas that date back to the 1970s and 1980s. Yet decades have passed with no action taken.

"The council here in Salem has always wanted to grow toward Highway 11," Alexander said. "Everyone would like to see the north part of the area grow."

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