

Field of dreams

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South Carolina Foothills Heritage Fair officials are hoping the fair will soon have a new permanent home. FILE

Ag group makes case for new facility

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — As Oconee's premiere family festival celebrating the county's agricultural roots gets ready to celebrate its lucky seventh annual event next week, a spokesman for the South Carolina Foothills Heritage

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Fair is making the case for building a multi-purpose ag center that can be the fair's permanent home.

With a passion for preserving agriculture in

Oconee for future generations to enjoy, make a living and provide fresh produce and meats to local supermarkets and restaurants, a group of farmers inaugurated the Heritage Fair in 2009. Beyond the fair and the family fun it generates, they had in mind the ultimate goal of growing the

event into an agricultural destination hub such as the Georgia National Fairgrounds and Agricenter in Perry, Ga., or the Western North Carolina Agricultural Center in Fletcher, which bring tourists to those areas by the droves.

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acres, an ordinance would have to be approved to be able to redirect the use of those funds, county administrator Scott Moulder said Friday. Moulder added that county council members will take up the purchase of the property at their next regular meeting Oct. 6.

Stanley Gibson, who chairs the Heritage Fair committee, called it a critical decision that could make or break the plans. If the county buys the land and leases it to the Heri-

itage Fair, Gibson said the group would plow ahead with a feasibility study.

"That would answer our questions, too, of whether it's just a pipe dream," Gibson said. "We think it's a great idea, but the study will tell us, 'no, that's not going to work,' or we get supportive data that we can turn around and say, 'if you build it, they will come.'"

Fair organizers thought they had a shot at fulfilling their dream when their ag center project was put on a wish list of 10 county projects with a price tag surpassing \$36 million that voters rejected in a referendum in November 2014. Voters had little appetite for a self-imposed sales tax increase to pay for the projects.

Fast-forward 10 months, and Heritage Fair organizers feel they have a golden opportunity to make their field of dreams a reality — if they can just get a little help from elected officials on county council.

The county has a purchase option agreement in place to purchase approximately 57 acres of pasture land on U.S. Highway 123 across from the former Shades of Shiloh nursery. County officials thought the property would be a good site for a proposed Tri-County Technical College campus in Oconee, but since then a decision was made to put the campus at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park on S.C. Highway 11 near Westminster.

County officials have until Dec. 31 to execute the option on the land deal. Fair officials see the property as the answer to their dreams.

Last month, during a meeting of council's budget and finance committee, county officials gave the ag group a ray of hope when they agreed in principle to pursue the purchase and consider allowing the land to be used for the fair organizers' future plans.

To use \$700,000 from the Tri-County Tech tax millage fund to purchase the 57