And the survey says ...

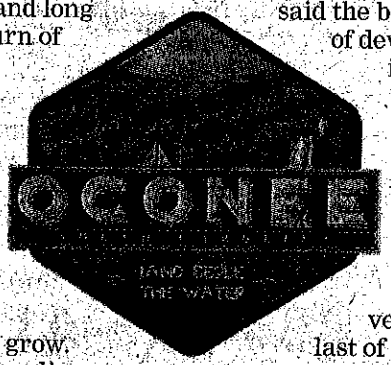
Planning feedback: Oconee residents value natural resources, industrial growth

SURVEY: Polled Oconee

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee residents hope to preserve the county's natural resources and long for the return of a life that connects them to their communities, yet they also want commerce and industry to continue to grow.

That's according to a survey taken for the development of the county's comprehensive plan and feedback from a series of public meetings that deputy director of community development Josh Stephens discussed Thursday at a business forum.



The comprehensive plan identifies goals and strategies for the future of the county, and Stephens said the biggest part of developing it is gathering public input. As of Wednesday, 1,340 Oconee residents had taken the survey, and the last of 12 community meetings was set for Thursday night at Blue Ridge Electric Co-op.

The survey showed people wanted Oconee to strike a balance between maintaining its character

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and continuing to grow, as the leading responses to what is most important for the county's future were preservation of natural resources (24 percent) and industrial recruitment and development (23 percent).

Most Oconeeans still get their news from newspapers — as 56 percent said it is their primary source of information about county issues, while 12 percent said television was their main source and 11 percent said radio.

Stephens said 57 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that they support using a reasonable amount of tax revenue to recruit industry, and 71 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that incentive packages are necessary for economic development.

In addition, 62 percent thought the county's approach to economic development has been good in recent years, while 83 percent believed local government should help guide development by assisting with infrastructure.

In terms of the most important characteristic in forming an opinion of Oconee, the most popular responses were lakes (18 percent) and friendly people (13 percent).

Stephens said the feedback he had gotten indicated it was important for the county to reinvest in its downtown areas and make them hubs for their communities again.

"I'm really hearing people desire and yearn for what we used to do, how we used to behave, in terms of how we should design and build our environment," Stephens said. "People are wanting connectivity — connectively with things like restaurants, coffee shops and grocery stores, and connectively with each other.

"So how can we invest in our communities to create those places of exchange that make communities communities? We used to live like that, but then we got away from it with urban sprawl and vehicles."

Some of the concerns that were expressed about Oconee's future, he said, dealt with roads, sewers and broadband Internet.

"People love the idea of being able to get Internet for the first time when companies like AT&T just won't run it to them," he said. "But obviously we're all aware of the frustrations that people are having in terms of getting Internet to them."

Stephens also addressed the Destination Oconee tourism marketing initiative and said he believes county council "took steps in the right direction Tuesday" by moving to have a position inside the county's economic development office to oversee the initiative.

Included in the Destination Oconee plan is the much-discussed "rustic elegance" design standard, and Stephens said he believes it is important that the county make efforts to control how it looks when possible.

"We have to be willing to ask for what we want," he said. "Because, you know what? People will probably do it."

Stephens said another thing he had heard was that the county's citizens wanted to "protect who we are," which meant protecting the future of agriculture in Oconee.

Council voted this week to move forward with a $700,000 land purchase between Seneca and Westminster for the construction of an agricultural center, as well as a permanent home for the S.C. Foothills Heritage Fair.

As far as other data from the survey, more than 50 percent of those who responded were over the age of 61, and 47 percent of those who responded were retired.

In terms of satisfaction with living in Oconee, 53 percent of those surveyed agreed they were satisfied and 9 percent more said they strongly agreed.

Fifty-one percent rated county services as good, while 34 percent said they were adequate, 10 percent said excellent and 5 percent said poor.

A major issue the county is facing in terms of growth is a lack of affordable housing, particularly for young professionals and first-time homebuyers, according to Stephens.

He said inflexible zoning rules limit the types of subdivisions developers are able to build in the county and often prevent them from building at affordable prices because of limitations on lot size and density.

"I think you can have more flexibility to respond to the market and build a variety of products, which makes your overall development a lot stronger," Stephens said. "And when you have a strong local real estate market, I think you have a strong local economy."

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