Blackwell: Oconee must prepare for economic pitfalls

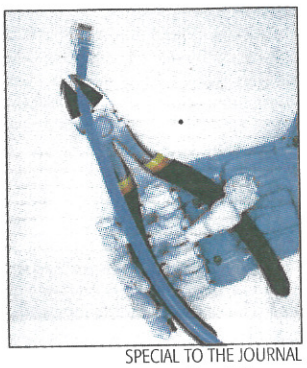
BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Richard Blackwell has a message for the citizens of Oconee County: Beware the robots.

The Oconee Economic Alliance (OEA) boss isn't talking about a scene out of some science-fiction movie, of course; he's referring to the threat robotics and other innovations pose to the county's workforce.

The robots are coming ... for our jobs.

"There's a thing called Baxter that's eliminating low-skilled labor," Blackwell said. "Baxter doesn't have health insurance or retirement plans, but Baxter can pack a box just as well as a $10-an-hour employee. ... Go to Itron or Sandvik, you see the robots. I don't want to sound clichéd, but they're coming."



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Oconee Economic Alliance director Richard Blackwell says innovations such as robotics are "eliminating low-skilled labor" in Oconee County. He believes sound long-term planning is crucial to the county's economic future.

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PITFALLS: 'We've got to get out and kill'

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Blackwell was responding to a question about the future of the county's jobs from planning commission chair David Lyle at a meeting Wednesday in county council chambers, where Blackwell gave an update on economic development in Oconee.

Blackwell cited a number of statistics showing the county's economy is thriving and suggested "prosperity is right around the corner."

In the six months since the OEA was formed in January, Blackwell said nearly $41 million in capital investments and 276 jobs have been announced. The latter is more than were announced in Oconee County between 2010 and 2013 combined, he said.

Additionally, the unemployment rate has dropped from 7.2 percent in January 2014 to 5.6 percent in May — though it is up a half-percent from a low of 5.1 percent — and the county's per-capita income has risen by $2,000 in the last 12 months.

"So hopefully you've seen more pennies in your pocket," he said.

Blackwell said during the depths of the most recent global recession, when much of the textile industry was leaving Oconee, unemployment was roughly 14 percent.

But while there are plenty of positive signs about the current economy, Blackwell said it is important that the county take a long view on economic development so the next generation of its residents don't find themselves lacking.

"What can we do to prepare those 10,000 students that are in our K-12 system right now to understand that you can't just get by?" he asked. "Getting by is not good enough anymore. You have to challenge yourself, you have to learn, you have to have a skill — and all that takes time."

Oconee looks set to take a big step in that regard with news last week that a satellite campus of Tri-County Technical College could be coming to the county in the near future.

Multiple members of the planning commission lauded Blackwell for his team's work to stimulate growth in the economy, and commissioner Ryan Honea pointed to the team's proactive approach in particular.

"I think that's been the biggest thing: We haven't been sitting on our hands saying, 'Well, we've got Duke Power to carry the load.' We're looking for something else to help carry the load now, and that's what we've got to do," Honea said.

Blackwell agreed it was crucial that the county make plans for when Duke Energy's relicensing ends in 2032.

"They may get another 20 years, but I don't want to hitch my wagon to a 'may,'" he said. "That's another reason we've got to diversify our industrial base — because I, the citizen of Oconee County, do not want to pick up that tax load."

Blackwell said Duke Energy turns in a tax bill more than $20 million each year that allows the county to have the third-lowest taxes in the state.

The loss of revenue from those taxes alone, clearly, would leave a major void in the county's economy.

"We don't want to do like the two old buzzards sitting on the fence waiting on something to die," Honea said. "We've got to get out and kill something."

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