Blackwell: 'Strong pipeline' of business prospects

Richard Blackwell succeeded Jim Alexander as the executive director of the Oconee County Economic Development Commission (EDC) in April of this year. He got off to a good start, finalizing the sale of the county's second spec building to A.I.D. Corporation and a new, incentive-laced deal for BorgWarner.



Blackwell

Then, in September, Covidien announced plans to shutter its Seneca plant by 2015 and put 600 local workers out on the street in addition to the 300 workers recently laid off by West Union-based Itron.

Undaunted, Blackwell and his marketing manager Russell Johnson have pushed on, urging county officials to move forward with sewers for the southern end of the county and more inventory to market to prospective businesses.

The Journal's County Government and Economic Development staff writer Mike Eads recently asked Blackwell what Oconee County taxpayers can expect from him and the EDC in 2013:

Eads: So you've been here since April. Regretting your decision to leave the Upstate SC Alliance?

Blackwell: No way **do I** even remotely regret the decision, as this job has been amazing.

Being chosen to lead the economic development efforts for Oconee County **is a great honor and a** tremendous responsibility **that I love.** Economic development is my passion **and one that** I hope translates into a better **quality** of life **for Oconee** County.

It may not happen overnight, but **I can assure you** that **hard** work **is being put in to bring about a better tomorrow for Oconee County.**

Eads: You came from being a member of a large team at the Alliance to running a two-man gang here. What's different?

Blackwell: The difference is **I get to** be more hands-on **here** and be **involved in** more things. This is something **I** enjoy **as it** helps **to keep you** focused **on** making Oconee County better.

When you have to do all the tasks necessary for a project rather than one aspect, it makes you appreciate the effort. I thought I was busy in my last job, but it does not hold a candle to the nature of this job.

Eads: When will the EDC's five-year strategic plan be complete?

Blackwell: On Jan. 8, the Oconee County Council will be asked to accept the strategic plan. We are working toward conducting an economic development strategic plan workshop with the County Council in mid-January.

Eads: What are you looking for from the council and the county as far as investments or action in the coming year?

Blackwell: Oconee County Council has been very supportive of economic development and that is all I can ever ask for. They understand that economic development is a process and not an event ... getting the strategic plan in place, along with the plan for sewer to the Golden Corner Commerce Park, will be big steps for Oconee County.

... Putting a shovel in the ground to bring sewer down to the southern portion of (Oconee) County will be a monumental step for our economic development strategy as it makes the Golden Corner Commerce Park highly marketable.

Eads: What can we expect this year at Echo Hills? Golden Corner? Seneca Rail Site?

Blackwell: What you can expect to see at the Echo Hills Industrial Park is completing Phase I of this park. This essentially means making it look and feel like an industrial park. With that perception, it will also have all the infrastructure in place and two "pad-ready" sites (300,000 square feet and 50,000 square feet). We will continue to aggressively market this site for economic development opportunities as well.

At the Golden Corner Commerce Park, the county will finalize the sewer plan that will give this park new life, as this is the last infrastructure need and a key ingredient going forward. Along with that, you will see the finalization of plans for the Blue Ridge electric substation that will be on-site to handle any demand needed at the park. Also look for finalizing agreements with Pioneer Water for their facility at the park.

With respect to the Seneca Rail Site (located next to the old Propex building), all of the infrastructure is already in place, so nothing major along those lines. We will likely put into our 2013-14 budget the necessary funds to allow for engineering studies to be done on the site and work toward getting this site certified by the South Carolina Department of Commerce.

Eads: Any significant announcements coming regarding existing industries?

Blackwell: The protocol is that we never comment on economic development projects currently being worked, **but I** will say **that** the pipeline is strong heading into (2013), and we have had positive discussions with a handful of local industries.

Eads: What do you **think** of the apparently imminent **approval** of the $100 million Sanctuary Pointe resort plan near Exit 1 on Interstate 85? What, if any, benefits would that bring to your efforts?

Blackwell: The Sanctuary Pointe project is a game-changer for Oconee County, as it will diversify **the** local economy, bring **new** jobs and get more tourists to **explore our dot on the map.**

... One big, immediate impact **it** will have for our efforts is it gets people thinking and talking about Oconee County. Think of that like striking a match.

Eads: I almost forgot to **ask if you** read James Fallows' cover story in this month's Atlantic? Do you agree that manufacturers **are** looking seriously at bringing their work back **to the** U.S.? **I** thought the piece had interesting observations about the rising costs of off-shoring versus **the** reset of manufacturing **costs** at home.

Blackwell: I did get a chance to read the stories related **to** the "China growth" and its impact on the global economy. It was a very interesting read, especially when you read that, then go shopping for the holidays and **see** all the products on the shelves and think how they got from "idea **to** market."

In **the** economic **development** arena, we, **too, have** seen this shift taking place as more and more manufacturers **are** looking at the cost structure for a foreign produced good versus those made in **the** States. When you factor in the labor costs rising **in** China, market demand for the products and **the** transportation/shipping costs going up also, well, it is no wonder why these manufacturers are looking to bring that production **back** to the largest international consumer – the U.S.

I would **not** expect to **see** big manufacturing **operations just** close up shop **in** Asia and move back right away, but you will **see** various product lines being shifted to U.S. production facilities. This **will**

translate into significant capital investments to get the facilities primed for that operation but also job creation.

This is a positive sign for the U.S. economy and one that we here in Oconee are looking to capitalize off of.