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Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell provides updates on current projects to board members at Blue Ridge Bank in Seneca Friday.

Blackwell offers economic updates

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SENECA — Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell updated the board of directors on the status of its projects Friday.

Blackwell reported to board members that OEA secured a $6.7 million capital investment from Oconee County-based firm Sealed Air. The company decided to move the product line out of Europe and into Arkansas, Missouri, Seneca or Texas. The company chose Seneca.

"(Project Laser) will result in new machinery and a handful of jobs," the executive director's report said. "(OEA) counted this for a 2016 success, but it will likely be announced by the (South Carolina) Department of Commerce in early 2017 as part of an expansion project in Greenville County."

Oconee County Council gave final approval in November to an incentive package for the parent company of the Cryovac brand to launch the expansion at its facility in Seneca.

Laser is a project OEA listed under "Project 'wins.'" Project Hawk is one of OEA's "hot" status projects that are going "in Oconee's favor," according to the director's report.

Hawk would bring Oconee County a $4-5 million capital investment and around 40 to 50 new jobs. The codename stands for an Oconee-based company that wanted to expand from the Midwest to either Mexico or Oconee. OEA received notice that Oconee secured the investment.

OEA is "working now on mechanics of the incentive process with (the company's) consultant based in Chicago," the director's report said. "Should have announcement in the next 60 days."

A second hot status project is Project Goggles, which Blackwell said would bring $3-4 million and between 15 and 25 jobs to Oconee. The company is considering investing in Seneca.

"Project Goggles is one that we got the green light from corporate toward the end of last year as well," Blackwell told board members. "We beat out a sister facility in Florida."

OEA met Thursday with the CEO of a company for Project Shell. Blackwell said the company is "still fully committed to their plans in Oconee County" and plans to get started in November.

"They have an option on land and are looking to finish up design of facility," the director's report said. "They have their funding and plans have commenced."

OEA has worked on the project for over two years.

OEA worked on Project Raven for three years and recently convinced an existing company to invest in the county. Blackwell said he expects to share more news in the coming weeks and months.

"It's going to mean a lot of good things for Oconee County," Blackwell said.

OEA is "working to finalize the incentive process" for Project Raven, according to the director's report.

The report listed Project Apollo 2 under projects that OEA gave eliminated/inactive status. Blackwell reported to board members on Friday that OEA lost Apollo 2, an effort to entice Volvo to locate in Oconee County. Blackwell called the loss unfortunate but said OEA can't control all the variables of the project.

"We can't move any closer to Volvo in Charleston," Blackwell said at Blue Ridge Bank in Seneca. "Unfortunately the company chose to work in Newberry even though there are a lot of good advantages to Oconee County. We can't change the distance where Oconee County is to Volvo."

Blackwell also said Oconee lost Project Forte. The alliance encouraged a timber-aligned company to expand in Oconee County but "lost the first round" when the company chose Montana instead.

"But we fully expect the second round to come back, and we'll entertain the company once again," Blackwell said. "I think what's happening in Clemson ... with the Wood Institute, there are going to be some synergies."

The Journal reported in August that Clemson University's Wood Utilization and Design Institute director Patricia Layton gave a presentation to OEA about the benefits of using wood for nonresidential construction.

Layton said that South Carolina's 13 million acres of forestland and the shift in the state from industrial to private land ownership created an oversupply of timber.

Blackwell said Friday that he hopes the institute would attract the timber company and its second round of expansion.

Moving on to the "cold" status projects of "little movement," Blackwell said that OEA will move forward with Project Cylinder and meet next week with an existing Oconee-based firm that wants to expand in its current location.

OEA is "weighing a few options and hopes to know more in coming months," the director's report said.

Blackwell told the board that Project Maxwell is at the same stage as Cylinder. An existing Oconee-based company approached OEA about its plans to continue its growth in Oconee County.

"We look forward to exploring that (project), and with that company here in the next couple of weeks, we're going to have a positive decision in the coming months," Blackwell said.

Blackwell remained positive during his presentation and said that when OEA formed members wanted to hit the ground running with downtown revitalizations and infrastructure additions.

"Some of those things take time," Blackwell said toward the end of the board meeting. "Unfortunately we can't move BMW any closer than the 60 miles away from us."

Blackwell recited one of his favorite quotes by John Wooden for the board: "Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

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