Change coming to county economic development

County Council panel calls for expanded mission statement and thinking 'outside the box'

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WALHALLA — Changes are coming in the way the Oconee County Economic Development Commission goes about its business.

For starters, County Council Chairman Reg Dexter and District 2 Councilman Wayne McCall approved a motion Thursday night calling on the EDC to expand its mission statement from its current focus on recruiting and retaining industry.

The directive was personally delivered to EDC Director Jim Alexander during a meeting of the Council's Planning & Economic Development Committee.

Furthermore, Dexter instructed Alexander to deviate from the old axiom of "build it and they will come" with regard to spec buildings. Although he's all in favor of having products to show, Dexter said he doesn't want spec buildings going up at taxpayers' expense.

Instead, Dexter wants the EDC to experiment with buying land, getting it shovel ready and donating it to a private developer who would finance a building on it.

"I want to start thinking outside the box," Dexter said.

The committee meeting turned into a forum for Dexter and McCall to get plenty off their chests on the many missteps of the past, missed opportunities and the tendency to let county plans and studies collect dust without ever getting anything done.

McCall suggested a new approach that would look to grow the entire county to bring in new jobs.

"We need to look at a whole plan for the county," McCall said. "The time bomb is ticking on so many things."

Dexter told the audience at the well-attended meeting that he appreciates the effort Alexander and the EDC are putting into making the county a better place to live.

"I appreciate the work anyone does to bring jobs and help with the situation we now have with the econ-

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omy," Dexter said.

However, Dexter emphatically called for action and not more words.

"If we're talking about this a year from now, kick me out," Dexter said to the voters sitting in the audience.

Dexter also indicated he would fully engage the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority (OJRSA) to get infrastructure into unincorporated areas. Specifically, Dexter wants to address the Sewer Water Action Group (SWAG) agreement that calls on the county to pay OJRSA $610,000 annually through 2038 to get sewer in places outside the municipalities.

To make his point of how much time and effort the county has wasted on sewer plans that never got off the ground, Dexter cited a 2004 Master Plan for Oconee County that addressed many of the issues still on the table today. He said the master plan was presented, but never adopted.

Dexter said infrastructure is the horse that needs to be leading the way.

"If this county does not proceed with a program that deals with water and sewer, we'll be going nowhere," he said. "If I had children, I would not stay in a place that's stagnant."

The full County Council has to vote on the motions approved by Dexter and McCall.