City leaders eye Project North

Officials react to possible county recreation involvement

BY ANDREW MOORE AND JESSICA SIBLEY
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WALHALLA — As the Oconee County Council considers the purchase of a more than 400 acres of land on S.C. Highway 11, city officials are chiming in about the possible impact a massive county-run recreation facility may have on their own operations.

Project North was presented last week as the future home of recreational opportunities and commercial and industrial facilities. Although the initial presentation focused on recreation, most councilmen said they see the site as a "jobs first" development.

Still, city officials are keeping a wary eye on the council's plans for the yet to be purchased parcel.

Greg Dietterick, city administrator for Seneca, questioned the wisdom of possibly siphoning off usage of city recreational facilities by duplicating services. He also said the county used to have a direct hand in financially supplementing the recreation activities of Westminster, Walhalla and Seneca.

"I would think that each city has invested a lot into their recreation programs," Dietterick said. "If you recall, there used to be funding from the county to the cities for recreation, but they eliminated that line item and just made it for fire protection."

"I don't know why we couldn't just work together and supplement existing recreation programs. ... I think it would be wise to enhance recreation facilities and programs already in place, instead of duplicating," he added.

County Councilman Wayne McCall disagrees with the idea of investing millions into recreation instead of industrial development.

"Spending $25 to $30 million on this recreation venture may be a dream for some, but they have no idea of the actual needs," McCall said. "Proposals within the Project North recreation plan would only duplicate and overlap many existing recreational assets. An assessment of all of the recreational uses should be on the table before the property is purchased."

But the council is divided on how the property should be developed.


Corbeil

Paul Corbeil said the main focus of the property is job creation.

"I'm not advocating early consideration of any significant recreational development. Larger recreational projects, if considered a priority in the future, should come in later phases. ... In my opinion, this is a jobs project, not a recreational project."

When first presented, there was no definitive statement that recreation would be at the forefront of any initial development should the property be purchased.

IT'LL COST YOU

Besides the $2.5 million it would take to buy the property and as much as $30 million to construct the recreation facilities shown in a development schematic, city officials say maintaining recreation facilities would also create new operational costs for the county.

Seneca Recreation Director Rick Lacey oversees one of the county's most active programs and said the vast majority of his annual budget is devoted to operational costs. Last year, Lacey operated the facilities with a budget of $762,476.

Westminster Administrator David Smith said his city's recreation budget totals $330,000.

Walhalla Mayor Randy Chastain said Tuesday that he would not be in favor of any county-run project if it meant Walhalla's municipal recreation opportunities would be in competition with the county. If it somehow enhanced Walhalla's appeal, he'd support it.

Smith also said Westminster is generally positive about the county plan.

"The more recreation opportunities available in overall Oconee County, the better," he said. "Since not everyone is able to drive extensively to various recreation sites, multiple recreation locations throughout the county would still be viewed as a good thing. While 'new' is good, proximity may dictate where some may go for recreation."

One thing most county councilmen agree on is the need for serious discussion with the county's municipalities should Oconee move forward on the property.

"I would think that as the county continues to plan for this project, there will be much needed dialogue between the county and municipal officials," Councilman Mario Suarez said.

"Project North will not adversely affect the municipalities. The project will present an opportunity for all of us to work together for the good of our county."

What's Your Opinion?

Vote your feelings about Project North in our online poll at



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(No registration needed.)