

Conservation Bank takes baby steps – board looks at

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WALHALLA — The new Oconee County Conservation Bank Board is not about to reinvent the wheel on processing requests to preserve valuable properties for future generations to enjoy.

Board Vice Chairman **Bob Hill** said Monday that the group intends to model its criteria and application process to that of the South Carolina Conservation Bank.

"It appears as if it's the best fit for us," Hill said.

Local attorney **Shea Airey**, the

group's chairman, said Monday that the state's model incorporates the requirements outlined in the ordinance approved by Oconee County Council that created the Oconee Conservation Bank.

"The South Carolina Conservation Bank has rather straightforward application and criteria," Airey said. "We looked at other counties, but theirs are more sophisticated and elaborate."

Airey said the state model would have to be modified and presented to the county attorney to make sure it meets the requirements of the enabling ordinance.

"It could possibly be adopted at the next meeting," he said.

Board members are confident that Oconee property owners would line up to apply for conservation easements once the program is promoted and explained. The group wants the application process and criteria done before promoting the program.

"We don't want to put the cart before the horse," Airey said.

The Board has invited Oconee County Treasurer Greg Nowell to its next regular meeting March 1 to discuss the setting up of a bank account for the organization.

Airey said he's had individuals tell him they would like to donate to the Conservation Bank. The organization needs funds to help

cover fees and costs associated with implementing a conservation easement.

Having local funding is often times used as a criterion in scoring applications for grants.

In approving the creation of the Conservation Bank, County Council made it clear they did not want the bank funded with taxpayers' money.

"Our goal is to raise private funds," Airey said.

Conservation Bank Board meetings begin at 9 a.m. in Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St. Walhalla.

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FILE PHOTO

The Oconee County Conservation Bank's goal is to protect valuable tracts, such as land surrounding Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls north of Walhalla, for the enjoyment of future generations.