Council OKs Highway 11 purchase despite outcry

11-24-10



PHOTOS BY JESSICA NELMS | THE JOURNAL

Oconee resident Berry Nichols speaks out against the way the Oconee County Council has handled the purchase of property on S.C. Highway 11 at Tuesday night's council meeting in Walhalla. "You've got your head in the sand too long, and you have your ears full," he said.

Propex deal, assisted living facility also advance

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — By a 3-1 vote, the Oconee County Council sealed the deal late Tuesday night on purchasing 415 acres on S.C. Highway 11 for economic development.

Council took the action despite vehement protests from frustrated — and sometimes angry — residents who showed up in unprecedented numbers during Tuesday's public hearing.

The final vote was taken at 11:15 p.m. when Chairman Reg Dexter and Councilmen Paul Corbeil and Mario Suarez voted in favor of the $2.5 million purchase.

Councilman Wayne McCall, blasting the lack of a plan to develop the property and a sales agreement that was signed last week, voted against it.

Councilman Joel Thrift waited outside Council Chambers until the vote was concluded. Thrift decided not to vote in the matter because of his lifelong friendship with the seller.

It looked as if the ordinance would never make it to a vote because of the number of people who wanted to give their opinions.

Late into the night, as one person lashed out against the deal and the way council

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Part of a standing-room-only crowd, predominantly opposed to the purchase of 415 acres on Highway 11, applaud their cause during Tuesday night's marathon Oconee County Council meeting. Council approved the $2.5 million purchase by a 3-1 vote.

COUNCIL: Has a long night

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had handled the matter, someone in the audience asked Dexter if a time limit could be set.

Dexter said there were no limits.

"It could be a filibuster," he said.

Much of the public was still reacting to conceptual plans rolled out two weeks ago suggesting that half of the property could be developed into a recreational complex that could cost tens of millions of dollars.

Since then, councilmen have pushed back against recreational use of the property and have said that the focus has always been drawing industry and creating jobs.

"We have a segment opposed to buying; we have a segment opposed to recreation," Corbeil said in addressing some of the public's comments. "I think there's a lot of people worried we're going to spend $30 million on recreation, and that's not going to happen."

Council also voted Tuesday night to move ahead with the City of Seneca to acquire the Propex industrial facility after almost tabling the proposal because of contamination issues at the site.

Council voted 4-1 to move forward after Seneca Mayor Dan Alexander said a company looking to do business at the facility would walk away if a deal was not worked out by today.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said the county could still walk away from the Propex deal should due diligence bring up more red flags regarding contamination.

Moulder also said the unidentified company looking to use the Propex facility would bring 60 jobs.

"They'll take their business to Spartanburg if we don't get it done," he said.

Seneca City Council has scheduled a final vote on the Propex deal for today.

Council also approved a resolution lending its support to a bond issue backed by the federal government of up to $13 million to help develop an assisted living complex near Keowee Key.

Council still had nearly half of its agenda remaining as midnight approached.

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