Council inks $2.5M buy

Project North purchase contingent on tonight's action

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WALHALLA — The Oconee County Council will hold a public hearing and the third reading tonight on a 415-acre, S.C. Highway 11 parcel they have already agreed to purchase.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter, County Administrator Scott Moulder and property seller B.M. "Snook" England Jr. inked a purchase agreement on the so-called Project North property Thursday, contingent on council approval. Moulder said the purchase agreement was part of the "due diligence" he was instructed to conduct on behalf of the county.

Council members had previously said the purchase must be closed by the end of the year to get the "below market value" price being offered by England. Thursday's purchase agreement carries the same deadline for closing the deal.

England is a lifelong friend of Council Vice Chairman Joel Thrift, in whose district the land is located. While Thrift has contributed to conversations regarding the purchase, he has recused himself from voting on the issue.

The county has agreed

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to pay $2.5 million in cash. The purchase agreement comes despite an acknowledged lack of consensus on the property's future use, in the face of only a vague timeline for development and before tonight's public hearing.

The first item of business on tonight's council agenda is a presentation by Dan Esteban of B.P. Barber, the firm that has conducted studies and surveyed the property. A Barber schematic of possible future use was rolled out two weeks ago, showing extensive recreational facilities and several industrial buildings. After Moulder pegged possible costs of the recreational features at $30 million, several councilmen backed off recreation planning and said they see the site primarily as a commercial or light industrial development, with any recreation component coming later.

Council has not had consensus on use of the property since the purchase emerged from a six-year hiatus this past summer. Councilman Paul Corbeil first put forth the idea of a mixed-use recreation/industrial complex similar to one built in suburban Atlanta. Councilman Wayne McCall voiced immediate dismay at the idea of recreational use to the exclusion of industry. Meanwhile Councilman Mario Suarez applauded the building of ball and soccer fields and a possible indoor recreation building with a pool.

The lack of consensus led citizens to call for a plan, which prompted the schematic introduced by the Barber firm two weeks ago.

Oconee Council has said it will use about $1.7 million in past and future utility tax credits from Blue Ridge Electric to make the buy. The acreage is in the Blue Ridge service area. Of that amount, $700,000 would be advanced from the county's cash reserves. The $800,000 balance of the funds would come from previously budgeted projects never undertaken and from an economic development millage fund.

Council members denied last week that the SC Highway 11 property represents a shift in county development strategy away from the county's other 400-acre parcel, the Golden Corner Commerce Park on S.C. Highway 59 near Fair Play, or from Interstate 85 development.

At the same time, however, Thrift, Dexter and Corbeil have all indicated they expect Project North could be marketable in 12 to 24 months due to the proximity of existing sewer and water lines. They have said Golden Corner development could take three years or more because infrastructure must be built from scratch.

The public participation portion of tonight's Pine Street meeting begins at 6 p.m., followed by the regular council meeting at 7 p.m.

before

hearing

Web poll: 90 percent oppose purchase

THE JOURNAL STAFF

A public hearing on the Project North purchase is slated for tonight's Oconee County Council meeting. If the results of a poll conducted on The Journal's UpstateToday.com website the past week is any indication, public sentiment could run against the council at the hearing.

In the sample, 80 percent of respondents said the council should not buy more land. Another 10 percent said the council should make a more affordable investment.