Countywide Sunday sales ordinance passes first test

BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County Council approved the first step in the process that supporters hope will allow voters to decide in November whether Sunday alcohol sales should be legal throughout the county.

The council approved first reading Tuesday night of a proposed ordinance that would put the question to the voters in the form of a referendum in the Nov. 4 general election. The ordinance would still need two more readings and a public hearing — all likely next month — before the issue could go on the ballot.

There was some confusion at Tuesday's County Council meeting about whether the measure, if passed, would cover the entire county or only the unincorporated areas.

Jean Funches, a taxpayer advocate with the S.C. Department of Revenue, said Wednesday the referendum, if approved, would make Sunday sales legal countywide, including the five municipalities. County administrator Scott Moulder confirmed his office had received the same information Wednesday.

Seneca is currently the only municipality in the county with Sunday alcohol sales. That came as a result of approval of a referendum in 2012. The City of Clemson in Pickens County is also considering a similar

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referendum this year.

The ordinance was drafted for Tuesday's meeting after Moulder and county attorney Tom Martin were asked to put it together March 4.

At that meeting, Dick Cottingham of the Lighthouse Restaurant made a presentation as a member of the Oconee County Chamber of Commerce Task Force for Sunday Sales. He called the measure "an economic development issue" and said it would "help promote tourism" in the county. Restaurants and bars would not be required to sell alcohol on Sundays. In fact, they would have to get a special permit to do so.

Cottingham added that the license fees would also generate additional money for the county.

Berry Nichols spoke against the proposal at the March 4 meeting, expressing his concern that Sunday alcohol sales could cause more alcohol-related problems, including domestic violence.

In other business Tuesday, the council approved $30,000 in grants to local agencies from accommodations tax money.

The grants approved were all recommended by the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission. The awarded grants were: SenecaFest, $10,500; Walhalla Civic Auditorium's weekend package, $9,000; the South Carolina Apple Festival, $3,500; Upstate Heritage Quilt Trail, $2,540; Walhalla Partners for Progress for the Old St. John's Meeting House, $2,640; Walhalla Chamber for Mayfest, $820; Lake and Mountain Quilter's Guild, $500; and Our Daily Rest Poker Run, $500.

The council also approved first reading of an ordinance to rezone more than 100 acres near Seneca from control-free to industrial. Moulder said the land is owned by the county and is being marketed as the Seneca Rail Site. The rezoning would help with efforts to get the property certified as an industrial site, according to Moulder.

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Bartender Tracy Donald serves customer Tom Loesch a freshly mixed drink at The Spot on the Alley in Seneca late last year. Seneca has had Sunday alcohol sales for more than a year, but Sunday sales could be legal throughout Oconee County if voters approve a referendum in November.

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