Crossroads | A gold mine or fool's gold?

Fate of proposed Commerce Park uncertain

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FAIR PLAY — Almost five years and more than $2.4 million after Oconee County officials bought a 397-acre piece of farmland to house the Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP), the project remains stalled by studies, state regulators' red tape and local policy makers' second thoughts about proceeding with a development that is sure to gobble up millions in public funds moving forward.


Moore

Quite simply, the project is at a crossroads.

Critics of the plan abound. Some call it the "Field of Dreams." Others laugh at it as the multimillion dollar hayfield. At one time it was referred to as "Ables Acres," an alliterative shot at former District 5 Councilman Frank Ables, who was a principal supporter of developing the project in Fair Play, located in his former district.

Questions still linger about the park's location, which has virtually no infrastructure around it, as well as the eyebrow-raising purchase price of about $5,680 an acre.

Former District 1 Councilman Steve Moore voted against buying the property from the Reidhead family. He questioned the deal and argued that the price of the land should have been closer to $1,800 an acre.

Moore's is among a growing number of voices calling on county officials to pull the plug on the project, rethink economic development strategy going forward and use the land for something other than an industrial park.

"When you're in a hole, you stop digging," Moore said.

A successful model

County officials gathering on Hilton Head Island this week for the South Carolina Association of Counties Annual Conference are keeping their options open. It could be that after hearing at the conference about Orangeburg County's economic development successes, Oconee officials might not be too quick to discard the GCCP.

Gregory Robinson, executive director of the Orangeburg County Development Commission (OCDC), addressed the gathering. He highlighted OCDC's achievements over the past five years — more than $625 million from approximately 170 expansions or new industry locations that have created nearly 3,400 jobs.

The successes don't include Koyo Corp. USA's announcement this week to invest about $10 million in expanding its operations at the 542-acre Orangeburg County/City Industrial Park. Koyo's expansion virtually guarantees there will be no layoffs at its Orangeburg plant during the

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Jessica Nelms/S

Development of the Golden Corner Commerce Park is one of the loo ing decisions facing Oconee County.

PARK

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lingering recession.

Robinson said the park was former farmland bought by the county in 1998.

However, that's where similarities with the Golden Corner Commerce Park end.

Unlike GCCP, the Orangeburg facility, a joint venture between the city and county, had infrastructure in close proximity.

Robinson said the park generated less than $53,000 in tax revenues in 1998 and 10 years later it is bringing in more than $1 million. He said the first tenant moved into the park in 2001. Now, the park is almost maxed out.

However, Orangeburg officials planned for future growth by acquiring options to buy land in proximity to the park. Robinson said development is underway on an additional 228 acres.

"We control the purchase price in and around the park for industrial use," Robinson said.

Several factors came together to create Orangeburg's success. First and foremost, Robinson said, was having infrastructure — water, sewer and power.

Secondly, the Orangeburg County Council has stood behind economic development initiatives to foster trust and continuity. Lastly, he added, the creation of public-private partnerships has been instrumental in establishing programs to build a quality work force.

Opportunity knocks

Oconee's success story is slow developing and yet to be written.

The inability, so far, to forge a winning strategy around Oconee's almost 400-acre farmland is frustrating not just to taxpayers, but also Economic Development Commission members and elected leaders.

Jim Morris, the expert consultant who worked with the county in 2007 to develop an Economic Development Strategic Plan, has referred to the I-85 Boom Belt as a golden opportunity that Oconee has been too slow to tap.

The executive summary of the plan calls for the identification and designation of the "I-85 Growth Area" for future development and infrastructure.

In the coming weeks, Oconee County Council must decide what the future use should be for the GCCP land and how much to spend on bringing sewer into it.

Previous policymakers were bent on spending the least amount of money on the project and even toyed with the idea of servicing the park with a septic system. They finally agreed to invest $4.3 million for a 50,000-gallon-a-day wastewater treatment plant. Another $4 million could expand the system to 250,000-gallon-a-day as the park grows.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter is receptive to the idea of at least considering a more expensive option — at a cost of about $8.5 million initially — for a sewer line from the park to the Coneross Wastewater Treatment Plant. The extension would bring development to a larger area of the county, including the coveted I-85 corridor.

Dexter also is leaving the door open to at least consider using the $1.8 million being proposed for a new spec building to finally get a sewer project done to service the park and other areas.

"To spend ($1.8 million) on one spec building, when it could be put toward a sewer line that opens many lots, that's something we need to look at," Dexter said.

He indicated he's had his fill of economic development studies and that there's no need for more of them.

"Everything I read in these reports is that I-85 is a place to be expanded," Dexter said. "I don't see anyone saying it should not be developed."

While Oconee continues to ponder, others are diligently getting their ducks in a row.

Blue Ridge Electric Coop (BREC) already is securing the financing to pursue a four-year plan that would run a transmission line past GCCP as part of the power company's goal of upgrading the Port Bass area. The plan is part of a $60 million investment outlined last year by BREC President and CEO Charles Dalton.

BREC Engineering Manager Alan Blackmon calls northern Anderson County and southern Oconee County "strong growth" areas with great potential.

"There's lots of growth taking place there," Blackmon said.

According to Moore, the former councilman, there are options to having an industrial park in Fair Play. He argues that an industrial park could be built at the more than 500-acre site where Anderson, Oconee and Pickens wanted to operate a tri-county landfill. He said the landfill site already has water and sewer. Such a project, Moore added, would likely be able to attract federal stimulus money because of its regional nature.

Moore said that would free up the land in Fair Play for a mixed-use residential-commercial development subdivision with homes, retail shops and even a county park.

Others have suggested taking the land and turning former Councilman Marion Lyles' dream of a county recreation center into a reality.

In the coming weeks, all of Oconee County will be waiting to see what path the present county council will take at this juncture of the crossroads.