

Done deal?

Votes appear in order for Project North

11-20-10

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Based on their answers to questions posed by The Journal about Project North, there appears little doubt that the proposed purchase of 415 acres on Highway 11 is a done deal.

Even though Councilman Joel Thrift, a strong supporter of the purchase, is not voting to avoid any appearance of impropriety with his lifelong friend and seller, Snook England, the votes are there to approve the \$2.5 million deal.

Councilmen Paul Corbeil, Reg Dexter and Mario Suarez are in favor of buying the land. The three agree that Project North is about creating jobs, although Suarez has always pushed for recreational use as well.

"The exact number of jobs that it will produce will depend on the different stages of development," Suarez said. "Project North will not be completed overnight. It is my hope that as the project moves



Suarez

IF YOU GO

What: Oconee County Council meeting
When: 6 p.m. Tuesday
Where: Council Chamber, Pine St., Walhalla
Why: Project North purchase, other business

ON THE WEB

Oconee County Council members' responses to Project North questions are available at upstatetoday.com.

forward from this initial stage of land acquisition we will have a clearer picture as to the number of jobs the project will create."

The lone vote against the land grab will likely be cast by Councilman Wayne McCall who is opposed to the majority's inclination to mix light industry with recreational facilities on the property.

McCall's opposition increased when county officials unveiled conceptual plans last week that would, over time, build elaborate recreational facilities, including baseball and soccer fields, a 2,000-seat amphitheater, a civic center and recreation building.

County Administrator Scott Moulder

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PROJECT: Vote looms

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suggested it could cost millions to build the recreational components.

"So called 'quality of life' spending in the millions of dollars must necessarily be put on hold in an economy such as we are now experiencing," McCall said.

However, Dexter is pushing back on the plush recreational plans.

"The major objective of Project North is job creation," Dexter said. "Clean commercial development is a major plus for the economy of the county. Also, the establishing of walking trails adds to work environment and to all citizens wishing to take advantage of this relatively inexpensive addition."

Although he's not voting, Thrift thinks a mixed-use of the land with industry and recreational opportunities would be successful.

"We would like to see some recreational opportunities provided for ma-

for industries and their employees," Thrift said. "This is a component of what industry is seeking today and in the future to ensure healthier employees."

A majority of the council also agrees that the county is not biting off more than it can chew at a time when it is juggling other projects such as the building of a new jail likely to cost more than \$14 million, a \$2 million remediation of the courthouse and the adding of sewer to the Golden Corner Commerce Park and the exits on Interstate 85.

Corbeil said council is playing catch up on projects that haven't received council focus in the past.

"Each is a legitimate high priority," Corbeil added. "With smart financial and strong project management, we will succeed."

A public hearing and final vote on the ordinance is set for Tuesday night.

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