Group promotes Oconee land conservation bank to save historical areas

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — A group interested in having Oconee County create and fund a Conservation Bank to protect natural and historical lands from development for the enjoyment of future generations is actively promoting a petition drive in support of its movement.

The Oconee County Conservation Bank Committee (OCCBC) formally kicked off its campaign in early December with a presentation before County Council.

The movement is led by J. Harold Thomas, chairman of Concerned Citizens for Conservation, Oconee Forever Chairman Bettina George and Alexander P. "Rex" Ramsay chairman of the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District.

OCCBC promoters launched a Web site — www.oconeecountyconservationbank.org — to generate support for their cause. They ask supporters to sign a resolution calling on County Council "to take immediate steps" to create and oversee a Conservation Bank. The petition also urges council to "provide a dedicated source of funding of no less than $1 million per year for the protection of the county's natural, cultural and historical resources.

Proponents of the movement want council to explore all feasible funding options, evaluate the county's needs and budget, and determine the best way to fund a local conservation bank.

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J. Harold Thomas
Concerned Citizens for Conservation chairman

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2009

However, not everyone embraced the Conservation Bank idea.

Oconee resident Donna Linsin said there is another side to the story that the conservationists ignored in their presentation. Linsin said land protected through conservation easements reduces the amount of buildable land in the county. She said this reduction in land that could be developed results in lost job opportunities, less affordable housing and more properties off the tax rolls.

Furthermore, she is concerned with the conservationists' open-ended agenda.

"They never tell us how much land they want," Linsin said. "What is the limit?

According to the South Carolina Conservation Bank, 12 properties totaling 3,359 acres have been bought or preserved through conservation easements using the state's land trust funds.

The most notable land preservation effort in Oconee came in 2007 when conservationists successfully raised funds through donations matched by the state's Conservation Bank to keep the beloved Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls surrounding areas from private development.

Conservationists point to the Stumphouse/Issaqueena Falls preservation effort as a rallying cry for establishing a local Conservation Bank. They say the relatively modest amount set aside by the state for preservation efforts is the reason why a locally funded bank makes sense.

"We have to conserve the treasures we have because when it's gone, it'll be gone forever," Thomas said in a message posted on OCCBC's Web site.

However, Linsin insists there must be a balance and that consideration be given to the points she raised.

"It's not that I'm against conservation," Linsin said. "We already have 30 percent of the land set aside for conservation. "How much more do they want?"

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