Group seeks conservation bank for Oconee County

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee County has reaped the benefits of conservation efforts to protect resources over the years, and now the county could be on a path to return the favor.

On Thursday, the Oconee Alliance board of directors voted to recommend to Oconee County Council the establishment of a local conservation bank.

The endorsement comes on the heels of Upstate Forever Director Brad Wyche's presentation to Alliance members on the benefits of conservation agreements between private landowners and the state.

Wyche called on counties to step up to the plate at a crucial time when the South Carolina Conservation Bank is underfunded because of budget cuts by the General Assembly.

He said state funding to the Conservation Bank shrunk from a high of $18 million annually during some years to $2 million this year.

The $2 million from the state barely keeps the Conservation Bank program on life support, Wyche said. Even during the best funding years, he added, the money does not come close to helping protect beautiful areas in Oconee, or other parts of the state, for future generations to enjoy.

"The local governments need to step up and be part of this," he said.

Wyche praised the County Council for giving $300,000 a few years back when the Walhalla community at large and conservationists throughout the Upstate rallied to save Stumphouse Mountain and Isaqueena Falls from falling into the hands of private developers. More than $1 million in private donations was raised to help preserve hundreds of acres surrounding the Stumphouse Mountain watershed.

"That was a crisis situation," Wyche told the group. "We need a reliable source of funding."

Wyche suggested that county funding could come from a portion from the deed-recording fee, which is how the state Conservation Bank also is funded.

Thursday's vote by the Alliance board, of which Council Chairman Reg Dexter is a member, could be the first step toward establishing a local conservation bank.

Alliance Executive Director Jim Gadd said the board's vote is in line with the Alliance's mission of protecting Oconee's quality of life, which is one of the factors driving growth in the area.

Gadd said Wyche would be asked to make a presentation to the full council in the near future.

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Brad Wyche
Upstate Forever director



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2A THE JOURNAL

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