Joining forces?

Oconee Alliance seeks merger with Economic Development Commission

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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WALHALLA — Representatives of Oconee Alliance are scheduled to meet with the Oconee County Council next month to ask the council to approve a merger of the alliance with the Oconee County Economic Development Commission.

County Administrator Scott Moulder made the announcement to commission members at their monthly meeting Friday.

"We looked for opportunities (that show) how could we strengthen what both organizations are doing," Moulder said. "It was decided that one team is much stronger if everyone is paddling the boat in the same direction, (and) we can do more. There's an opportunity for us to join forces. Part of our plan says that we look



Moulder

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at a nonprofit structure that would encourage more public-to-private partnership to have more private involvement in what we do. This nonprofit that we were looking at will basically be a merger with Oconee Alliance."

Robert Halfacre, chairman of the board of directors for Oconee Alliance, said the decision was made during a retreat Thursday.

"We're very excited about the merger," Halfacre said. "We think this is a great next step for Oconee Alliance. We will obviously be working through the details over the next two or three months, but our philosophy will remain to promote Oconee County as a great place to live, work and play."

Discussion about a potential merger between the two groups has been ongoing for several months. A strategic plan for economic development presented to County Council in January called for the commission to have nonprofit status, allowing for more private partnership with the county, as well as combining some groups with the commission.

Jim Gadd, who has served as executive director of the alliance for the past seven years, announced in late July he was stepping down because his wife, Elisabeth, took a job in Orlando, Fla. Gadd's resignation is effective Aug. 31, just days before Alliance officials meet with County Council on Sept. 3.

Halfacre said Gadd's resignation "enhanced" the timeliness of the discussion because the board needed to discuss the next steps of the alliance. He added that Gadd was involved in the discussion, describing his input as "very crucial."

Moulder said he's excited about the new partnership.

"We're extremely excited about strengthening the efforts going forward and trying to defragment, if you will, the efforts that we all overlap with," Moulder said. "They decided it was the best thing for them. It's not like they're just walking away from their organization and saying, 'We're done.' It's a continuation of what they've been doing, a continuation of what we're doing. We're going to put those efforts together."

Gene Blair, a member of the commission, asked about the potential to include the three chambers of commerce in the county in the partnership in the future.

"I think there is obviously value with the three chambers," Moulder said. "If they see what we're doing and they want to talk to us about it, we'd love to talk to them. We'd like to get past this first with the alliance. It could be a wonderful thing, but it's got to be mutual on both sides, just like it was with the alliance."

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