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Keowee River plans part of growing trend

By CARLOS GALARZA
carlos@dailyjm.com

SENECA — The vision for the 774-acre Keowee River mixed-use development announced Thursday is a growing trend in neo-urban planning that would catapult Oconee County into the elite areas in the Southeast and the rest of the nation embracing master-planned communities to live, work and play.

Over the past five years, more developers have stopped building enclosed shopping malls in favor of lifestyle developments where residents can leave their cars home and stroll to a restaurant, walk to the movie theater, hop from one store to another or ride a bicycle for miles surrounded by beautiful waterways and mountains as the promoters of Keowee River envision.

The Village at Sandhill in Columbia is an example of the kind of new urban design that reflects a shift from 20th century sprawl typically depicted by massive indoor malls surrounded by a sea of parked cars.

All shopping and entertainment is walking distance away for the residents of the Village. When fully completed, the master-planned community will count with more than 150 condominiums, 2.5 million square feet of retail space, office buildings, entertainment venues and a hotel all linked by landscaped streets and winding sidewalks.

The Village at Sandhill was a 2007 finalist in the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) competition for the best mixed-used shopping center in the world. Entries from more than 90 countries vied for the ICSC award, and the Village was just one of four mixed-use developments that were among the nine finalists.

For all its magnificence, the Village pales in comparison to the unique outdoor-adventure themed design envisioned by the developers of Keowee River.

The pristine location, just four miles north of Seneca off Highway 130, and surrounded by lakes and mountains, offers a perfect backdrop for the $200 million project planned in phases over two decades.

Erin Hershkowitz, a spokesperson for ICSC, calls mixed-use developments a win-win for the developer and retailer because the future residents of the complex provide "built-in" business.

"Mixed-use lifestyle centers is a trend that brings in residents, retailers, hotels, restaurants and entertainment," Hershkowitz said. "We saw them first along the larger cities and warm climates in California and Florida, and now they're popping up in rural areas."