

Keowee winery would break zoning barrier

Planning commission sends development plan to county council

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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WALHALLA — A public hearing is set next month for potentially the first property zoned into a planned development district in Oconee, but some county residents believe it is short-circuiting the zoning process.

A revised development plan for the Equus Club at Lake Keowee, which bills itself as a retreat featuring "fine wines, friendly faces and Southern hospitality," was unanimously recommended to county council for acceptance by the Oconee County Planning Commission this week.

But during public comment at Monday's meeting, several citizens spoke up and said that since part of the property lies in Oconee's lake overlay district, which is not a separate zoning district, but applies to all of the county's shorelines, it should not be eligible for rezoning.

The development plan details variances from county codes, such as road standards, by which the planned development would be guided.

"The purpose of a PDD is to help you build in flexibility to help you create the product you want," county zoning administrator Josh Stephens said, "with the understanding that you can do this and you can offer up amendments to ordinances and play by a little different set of rules ... to help you overcome some of the challenges you can foresee in your project.

"The point of the PDD is to get one approval at one time for everything."

Stephens said no property has been zoned into the planned development district to date by Oconee County.

"Should this be adopted by Oconee

County, this would be the first," he said. "And it just so happens that it is on the lake, and we're having to contend with that lake-overlay component."

Commissioner Ryan Honea noted the plan called for two houses per acre, which he said is "better than some places in the overlay," while Bozo Richards noted it also has a 50-foot lakeshore buffer.

As with any other rezoning, the commission's recommendation will go to council, which will act on it as its members see fit, including making amendments to the development document.

The project already had its first reading before council in title only Sept. 1, so it could go to second reading with a completed development plan as soon as next week's meeting.

Stephens confirmed the acceptance

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Advocates for Quality
Development president

of the plan would remove the county's Board of Zoning Appeals from the process as it relates to granting special exceptions to the Lake Overlay District.

"Because in this document we're essentially voiding the provisions contained within the lake overlay," he said.

Stephens clarified that is only how the document reads currently, prior to a review by legal counsel.

Richards motioned to recommend that council accept the document as reviewed on Monday, and the motion passed unanimously.

Last month, businessman Russ Gardiner presented plans to the commission about his proposed development, which would combine a winery, restaurant, equestrian center, cottages for overnight stays and about 30 lots to be set aside for residential homes.

To accommodate his project, Gardiner is asking that Oconee rezone some 430 acres from residential to planned development district.

Gardiner's development on Stamp Creek Road includes about 150 acres on the shores of Lake Keowee abutting the Cliffs at Keowee Falls South near Salem.

Former planning commission member Andy Heller spoke during public comment and said while she was in favor of the project, she urged the commission not to negate the lake overlay district.

"We worked too hard to get that and built into it that you could have variances, you could have special exceptions," she said. "That overlay should

be sacrosanct. If you negate it, this will open the floodgates."

Salem resident Gary Owens said he lives near Stamp Creek Road and believes the project should be beneficial to the area and county, but encouraged the planning commission and staff to "work the details" of the proposal.

"While the zoning changes might make perfectly good sense for such a high-quality project, the staff and the planning commission should clearly make it known to the developer, the county council and to the BZA that they must follow the established process for getting appropriate approvals for any non-residential uses proposed within the lake overlay," Owens said.

Jim Schoonover, president of the Advocates for Quality Development, said that AQD is neither for nor against the Equus Club's request for a planned development, but echoed previous concerns about its impact on the lake overlay district, which he said should take precedence.

"If the lake overlay is overlooked or ignored, this could have a detrimental effect on the lakeshore and the people who live on the lake or use the lake," he said.

A public hearing before council on the project has already been set for Nov. 3.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6685