

Lake Keowee winery, mixed-use plans draw interest

Project described as 'expensive country club without a golf course'

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALHALLA — A California transplant to the Upstate is scheduled to make a second presentation next week to the Oconee County Planning Commission in hopes of getting zoning approval for a mixed-use Lake Keowee development described by one county official privy to the plans as "an expensive country club without a golf course."

The planning commission scheduled a meeting a week from today to hear again from entrepreneur and businessman Russ Gardiner, who promised to bring tangible plans and details for his ambitious concept combining a winery, restaurant,

equestrian center, cottages for overnight stays and the opportunity for the public to buy a certain number of homes available on approximately 20 percent of about 430 acres, including about 150 acres hugging Lake Keowee and abutting The Cliffs at Keowee Falls South near Salem.

The meeting next week at Oconee County Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St. in Walhalla, will begin at 6 p.m.

Gardiner, who lives in Greenville, gave planning commissioners an overview of his project during a meeting Sept. 14.

The developer said the plan is to get the winery

going by having crushed grapes brought in from the best vineyards in California until a homegrown vineyard is cultivated for the long term. Even then, Gardiner said crushed California grapes would continue to be brought in, blended and aged with locally cultivated grapes. He said the winery would be open to the public.

The concept of the win-

ery, equestrian center and all accompanying amenities will operate under the banner of "Equus Club at Lake Keowee."

Planning commission member Charles "Bozo" Richards said he liked what he's heard about the project and its business model of generating income through paid membership.

"It's an expensive country club without a golf course," Richards said.

"I was impressed with (Gardiner) and what he's done."

Commissioner Ryan Honea also likes what he's heard and thinks such a development would enhance local tourism and be good for Oconee County.

Honea said it is the first proposal to come under the planned development district in the county's zoning ordinance.

"It's something that will be good for the county," Honea said. "It's nothing that would be detrimental in any way. It would

enhance the county in the things it is doing"

Josh Stephens, deputy director of Oconee Community Development, said Gardiner wants the planning commission to rezone the proposed development area from residential district to planned

development district.

Stephens said time is set aside at next week's meeting for the public to comment on the proposal, and Gardiner will be answering questions.

carlos@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6684

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