More than just a school

Charter school could help bolster Salem's economy

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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SALEM — With a definite closure of Tamassee-Salem Middle and High School in sight, the town of Salem is considering all of its options — not only a charter school, but also partnerships with the Oconee Economic Alliance and Tri-County Entrepreneurial Development Corporation to generate economic growth in northern Oconee County.

Since the school closure will impact the town's economy, town leaders contacted OEA executive director Richard Blackwell for insight.

Blackwell understands that schools are economic drivers. Build a school and residential growth will follow, he said, and commercial development will also follow.

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"The three ingredients to generating commercial development are infrastructure, rooftops and community patterns," he said. "So when you take a school out of downtown Salem, it is potentially a nightmare scenario, because you'll lose a strong economic driver for the community."

But that nightmare can be remedied by a charter school coming into the community, according to Blackwell. And he sees the charter school not only as a solution for Salem, but as a solution for a much larger area.

"Charter school students can come from just about anywhere — it just comes down to how far mom and dad want to drive," he said. "This is going to be an economic draw from a very big circle, not only from the immediate Salem area, but hopefully people from anywhere in Oconee and Pickens counties."

Charter schools generally offer something a little different from the traditional educational model. And that's appealing to a lot of families, since not all children learn in the same ways.

Blackwell said whatever the curriculum basis is, charter schools are often on the front lines of innovation, acclimating kids to the future of technology.

But there's another angle to this prospective project. The town of Salem is considering additional avenues for utilizing the void left from Tamassee-Salem Middle and High.

"I've been told that there could possibly be a partnership with us on the economic development front — a partnership with Tri-County Entrepreneurial Development Corporation and the TCEDC incubator," he said.

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TCEDC in partnership with the Oconee Economic Alliance operates the Oconee Business Center in Walhalla, a small business incubator designed to support small businesses during startup and early growth stages. The incubator in Walhalla is about half full.

"If someone has a pickle recipe that grandma's been handing down for a number of years and people love it, maybe they now have an opportunity to use a certified kitchen to perfect that recipe, package it, sell it and start making money," he said. "Now you have a new business that's opened up."

The main focal point of Salem's plan is the charter school, but ideas are being pursued to help drive economic growth for the entire region of northern Oconee County.

"What the town of Salem leaders are trying to do is ensure growth for the town — that's what we're here for," Salem town clerk Kim Alexander said. "There are still lots of questions to iron out, but people have to choose what's best for their students. Small classrooms and having individualized attention — not being in a school with over 1,000 other students — that sounds appealing."

The town of Salem has invited students and parents from all Oconee County attendance zones to attend a meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Salem Community Center to discuss the potential for a charter school.

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