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New Lake Keowee winery pitch impresses planning commission

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WALHALLA — A Greenville entrepreneur told Oconee County planners this week that he could be operating a Lake Keowee winery in about a year's time after he gets approval for a mixed-use development plan that includes an equestrian center, lodgings and residential homes.

Businessman Russ Gardiner presented detailed plans and fielded questions from members of the Oconee County Planning 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, called "Equus Club at Lake Keowee," Gardiner is asking Oconee County to rezone some 430 acres from residential to planned development district. Planning staff is

expected to recommend approval of the zoning change when commission members meet Oct. 12.

All six of the seven planners who were present and heard Gardiner's presentation Tuesday night liked what they heard and saw, commission member Charles "Bozo" Richards said.

"The six of us were very, very impressed with what he had to say and what he presented," Richards said Thursday. "What I expect at the next meeting is that it'll come back to us, and we're probably going to vote OK and send it on to (Oconee County Council) with a recommendation to go ahead with it."

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.

"Our mission is to assemble an all-star team of winemakers to make the best wine in the South," Gardiner's website, equusclubwinery.com, says.

The winery will be paired with the Equus Culinary Center with a "farm-to-table" concept featuring specially designed outdoor grilling stations. The culinary experience envisioned by Gardiner would include cooking classes through a visiting chefs program in partnership with Culinary Institute of the Carolinas/Greenville Technical College.

"Our chefs will show our members how to create delicious dishes all year long," the website says.

Richards said that under the rezoning change to planned development district, 20 percent of the 430-acre development must be residential, five percent commercial and the rest would have to be green space.

Richards said it's possible Gardiner's project could be brought to county council as early as Oct. 20.

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