New 'Y' facility would open additional doors

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THE JOURNAL

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2011

SENECA — Foothills Area Family YMCA officials said Thursday night that a permanent facility would allow them to enhance the array of programs already offered throughout Oconee County as well as in Clemson and Central.

"There is no facility in Oconee County that has a swimming pool as well as basketball and volleyball courts," said YMCA Board Chairman Fred Stutsman during a presentation at the Shaver Recreational Complex.

The Y currently has partnership agreements with local municipalities to offer such sports as soccer, classes that include dog obedience, after school care at seven elementary schools and summer camps. But Stutsman said a permanent Y facility "opens the possibility for more programs."

"If you want to use a family aquatic center, the closest one is in Central (at the Central-Clemson Indoor Rec Center)" he said. "We want to drown-proof kids by third grade and have borrowed the Westminster pool and Keowee Key pool (to teach swimming lessons)."

Stutsman also discussed a fitness center, including aerobics classes and free weights; and a multipurpose room with gym that could be used for meetings, banquets and community gatherings. A recent online survey ranked a lap pool and fitness room as the top two choices of respondents.

Stutsman said the type of Y to be built would depend on what the public wants. He said it would cost more than $5 million for a 29,700 square foot facility that could house a wellness center with 50 machines; a gym, exercise and multipurpose room, a child care center, aquatics center and locker rooms.

Executive Director Anna Connelly said where the new Y facility or facilities will be located is also crucial to its future success.

"The national Y says most people are willing to drive 15 to 20 minutes to go work out," Connelly said.

The Keowee River development on SC Highway 130 once appeared to be the hands down choice for the Y's future home. In August 2009 an announcement to that effect was made. And, while the Y office was relocated there in January, officials said economic conditions and questions regarding the ability of location to serve the needs of the area led to exploring other options.

Although the door hasn't been closed on Keowee River, the Y recently sought alternate site options and is reviewing five or six possibilities. Those sites include Echo Hills Commerce Park on S.C. Highway 11 and a more central site in the Bountyland-Sheep Farm Road area between Seneca and Walhalla.

So far, 23 percent of survey respondents said they would like the Y to remain at Keowee River while 16 percent favor Echo Hills and another 16 percent want the facility in Seneca. Stutsman said two YMCA facilities, offering different programs, is a possibility that cannot be ruled out. But he adds that everything hinges on how much financial support the public is willing to provide.

"You've got to operate this thing and operate it in the black," Stutsman said. "The community will get the Y they're willing to pay for."

A site location decision is expected in January. The design phase will run through March and fundraising will start in April.

Stutsman said a permanent Y facility could bridge gaps in culture, social and racial divides that exist throughout the county.

"There's a lot a Y could do to bring this community together, which is what we need," Stutsman said.

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