OC economic developer

predicts banner year

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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WALHALLA — Coming off its most prolific year to date, Oconee's leading economic developer predicts that the county will double that amount of capital investment this time around.

That would have been already guaranteed, of course, had a $175 million deal with Michelin North America not fallen through last month. But Richard Blackwell told the county planning commission this week that setback won't keep the Oconee Economic Alliance from achieving its primary goals in 2016.



Blackwell

Blackwell said Oconee leads the state of South Carolina in wage growth, according to the U.S. Census, and through economic development efforts, roughly 900 new jobs have been created in the county in the last four years.

"So there's more money in the pockets of people here in Oconee County," he said, "and it continues to rise. So that's something that we're satisfied with."

The OEA director said the credit for that success was not due to the office, but an economic base in the county that he referred to as a three-legged stool — manufacturing, agribusiness and the tourism service economy.

"The only way we're going to keep low taxes is by continuing to diversify our economic base," he said.

As for Michelin, Blackwell said the county is "still talking to them every month" and hopes a deal can come to fruition.

But Blackwell said that through economic development efforts, Oconee added 426 new jobs and $53 million in capital investment last year alone, and even without Michelin, there are plenty other projects in the pipeline.

"In 2016, if everything pops the way it should — just with the deals that are working through county council now — we'll double the capital investment that we had last year," he said. "And that's important to the

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taxpayers, because we want to diversify the tax revenues.

"There's this big, bad thing that we have to keep in mind called Duke Energy, and at some point — I hope in my lifetime; I hope I live another 60 years — nuclear power generation on that campus as we know it is probably going to look different.

"And by looking different, it may mean lessening the revenues coming off that facility. I hope I'm wrong, but we can't hedge our bets on something like that."

Blackwell said one challenge the county is facing is a lack of industrial buildings — his inventory does not currently include anything between a 20,000-square-foot building and a 200,000-square-foot-building.

"Nothing in between," he said. "If my phone rings right now from somebody in China who needs a 60,000-square-foot building, we do not have it. ... We've got land, but a lot of companies have been approved for a building solution. They can't wait six to 12 months for that building to come out of the ground.

Blackwell also talked about the role of speculative buildings in driving growth.

"We've built two, and we've sold two," he said. "We the taxpayers did not lose money on either of those deals. ... We returned roughly $500,000 back to the general fund."

With the Michelin deal off the table, at least for the time being, the county has moved to revive a previous deal with Pattillo Industrial Real Estate to develop the Golden Corner Commerce Park — where Michelin would have located — on S.C. Highway 59 near Fair Play.

"That park will sell itself. ... You're talking 2 miles to the Interstate, either Exit 2 or Exit 4," he said. "We've lost a lot of projects because our friends at Michelin have had that land tied up. Which is fine. We made that choice, and it was a good choice.

"But we've seen the activity, and we know the activity is there — and we've just got to continue to invest in ourselves."

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