Oconee County Council approves 5-year economic development plan

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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WALHALLA — Members of the Oconee County Council gave an initial green light to a five-year Strategic Plan for Economic Development during a work session and meeting Tuesday night.

Richard Blackwell, executive director of the Oconee County Economic Development Commission, said the implementation of the plan could lead to an increase in his budget by $50,000 to $100,000 in the next year, although all of that money would not come from public funds. He also said he hopes to have a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation, which is part of the five-year plan, in place by the end of the year, attracting private business input and funding.

The council directed County Administrator Scott Moulder and Blackwell to put together a timeline for reaching goals set forth in the plan.

The plan, presented to council during the work session, calls for focused efforts to retain current business and attract new ones. It includes the development of the non-profit corporation which would bring more involvement from the business community, more marketing efforts to "tell Oconee's story," and would eventually move the county's economic development office to the Golden Corner Commerce Park in southern Oconee County.

In his presentation to the council, Kyle Talente, vice president of RKG Associates, emphasized that Oconee County should focus its attention on retention of current business as much attracting new business to the county.

"It's a lot cheaper to keep a company than attract them," Talente said.

Council Chairman Joel Thrift agreed that retention is important.

We are very concerned about retention of these businesses," said Thrift. "We might have overlooked some the past. We want to make them stakeholders (in economic development) because they are the backbone of Oconee County, South Carolina and the nation as a whole. Everybody is going to have to obstacles. We don't want to be one of them."

501 (C) (3) ORGANIZATION

Talente said the development of the 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation would allow the economic development program to receive funds from individuals and foundations, which may support the efforts but would not give funds to a government entity.

The organizational structure would also allow representatives of the business and industry communities to serve on the board of directors and advisory boards to give greater input for the strategies.

"Growing the people involved in economic development makes a lot of sense to me," said Council member Archie Moore.

Talente and Blackwell said most of the counties in the Upstate have started non-profit corporations, and many of them are receiving significant portions of their funding from private sources.

"This is something that exists in South Carolina, and it is about leveraging funds," said Blackwell.

SEE OCONEE, PAGE A5

MARKETING

Blackwell said the most quickly noticeable change with the new plan will likely come in the form of marketing efforts that will include promotional brochures that "tell Oconee's story and why it is a special place to live."

Talente also recommended the hiring of a marketing director who would give Russell Johnson, project and marketing manager for the Economic Development Commission, more time to focus on projects in the county. Moulder said the new position would likely start using contracted personnel and move to a full-time position as the need and finances provide.

Talente emphasized that the county needs to work on building relationships that could eventually become partnerships.

"You need to build relationships before you build partnerships," Talente said.

NEW HOME

The plan also calls for the relocation of the economic development office from Walhalla to the Golden Corner Commerce Park near Interstate 85 and Fair Play sometime over the next five years.

The plan estimates a cost of $750,000 to $1.5 million to build the new building. Blackwell and Talente said the project could be scaled back to cut costs and the money could come from private as well as public funds.

"You want your economic development organization to put its best foot forward and the current location does not put its best foot forward," Talente said. "As they are driving from the interstate you want them to see nothing but progress."

Moulder added that potential prospective new businesses will "remember how close they were to the interstate."

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