Oconee economic leaders endorse new spec building

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Frustrated from seeing business opportunities slip away because of the lack of suitable industrial or manufacturing buildings, economic development leaders in Oconee County are recommending construction of a new speculative building.

Oconee Economic Alliance board members voted to endorse financing a 60,000- or 70,000-square-foot spec building that could be expanded to roughly triple the size at the county-owned Oconee Industry and Technology Park on S.C. Highway 11 near Westminster.

The action was taken during the board's monthly meeting Friday at the offices of Blue Ridge Bank in Bountyland.



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell, left, and project manager Russell Johnson explain plans for a new speculative building to the OEA board Friday.

Easy financing terms through a revolving loan program offered by Santee Cooper, the state's largest power producer and one of the biggest utilities players in the nation, made support for the proposed project that much easier for OEA board members.

The loan would be interest free for the first three years.

Oconee County Council has in the past approved two spec or shell buildings that were financed in part through tax credits. The buildings sold within 24 months of being constructed and marketed, bringing business, investments and jobs to Oconee.

Since 2012, 22 cities and counties in the state have borrowed more than $55 million through Santee Cooper's loan program to spur economic development in their areas, according to OEA executive director Richard Blackwell.

Blackwell and OEA project manager Russell Johnson showed board members a map of OITP to pinpoint the spot where they hope a spec building will be built.

"Putting marketable assets in place to go along with (other projects at the industrial park), it's only going to make it that more marketable and easier to sell," Johnson said.

The loan program will finance up to 60 percent of the project cost, which is expected to be less than $2 million.

OITP will be the future home for a Tri-County Technical College campus, a school-district-operated workforce development center and new economic development offices for the county.

Additionally, several other private projects are going at the park, including Project Shell, which Blackwell said would begin construction in the second quarter of 2016.

Blackwell said Project Shell would "put Oconee on the map."

Board chairman Glenn Buddin asked Blackwell what the downside would be to constructing a shell building with a Santee Cooper loan.

"The worst-case scenario the global economy goes haywire next year and we're stuck holding the building paying interest on it," Blackwell said. "I don't think that would happen. Even in a down economy, they say 2012 was a down economy, and we sold our spec building in nine or 10 months."

Oconee County administrator Scott Moulder said the recommendation would be taken to county council.

carlos@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6684
Follow on Twitter @cgvnewsupstate