

Oconee to join in area growth planning event

Upstate Reality Check to draw stakeholders from the 10-county region Wednesday

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WALHALLA — Oconee County will have a seat on the table to discuss and brainstorm ideas that address growth in the region during the "Upstate Reality Check" forum in Greenville on Wednesday.

Reality check was created by the Urban Land Institute and has been used by metropolitan areas throughout the United States to engage stakeholders in a regional dialogue on growth issues. The Upstate Reality Check (URC) is a joint initiative of Upstate Together and the South Carolina chapter of the Urban Land Institute.

To date, 21 Oconee County participants have been recruited to join representatives from the other nine counties in the region at the Carolina First Center for the event that runs from 8:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Organizers are hoping to attract 40 participants from each of the Upstate's 10 counties.

Stakeholders will be asked to build an action plan for working regionally to manage growth in ways that are economically viable and environmentally sustainable to handle an estimated 234,000 new residents, 118,000 new households and 203,000 new jobs to impact the 10-county region by 2030.

West Union Mayor Sharon Nunnery, one of Oconee's participants in the event, said

Friday that it's important for the county to know what surrounding counties are doing so they can all work together.

"We can't put our heads in the sand and hope it works out," Nunnery said. "We have to plan our growth to complement other areas so that Greenville, Anderson, Pickens and others will complement Oconee's growth."

Nunnery said that with West Union hugging a major and important state artery such as Highway 11, any growth on either side of the highway is going to impact her town.

"West Union is going to be a vital part of Highway 11 growth," Nunnery said.

John Adams, of Adams Commercial Real Estate, will be joining the forum with the expectation of sharing ideas and priorities with other stakeholders as the region looks to the future. He also is hopeful the event will help develop serious working relationships as the region grows, as well as gaining a sense of how each community can help each other going forward.

Adams' long list of possible outcomes from URC includes coming up with "something big" that could distinguish the region from other areas.

"I'm still looking for the big deal, something that the region as a whole may be known for," Adams said.

Other results he hopes to see include new and improved

transportation corridors for a variety of transportation modes, including safe cycling opportunities; a spirit of cooperation between municipalities and counties in their respective spheres of influence; gaining a grasp of what the region's workplace will look like in the coming decades; and preserving and improving quality of

life in the region.

Another participant, Oconee Economic Development Commission Director Jim Alexander, said infrastructure costs are so prohibitive that partnering with neighboring counties on projects appears to be the way to go in the future.

"The more people you get

involved in what you're trying to do the better it's going to be," Alexander said.

Advance South Carolina, a Duke Energy foundation, contributed \$50,000 seed money to help fund the URC event. Sponsors of the event include Oconee Medical Center and Blue Ridge Electric Coop among others.

The Oconee County Council approved a \$1,000 contribution to the event.

The Urban Land Institute was founded in 1936 to facilitate an open exchange of ideas and information among local, national and international leaders dedicated to creating a better place. The organization has 40,000 members worldwide.



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During the Charleston Reality Check event held more than 16 months ago, stakeholders used LEGO blocks representing a certain number of households and jobs on a grid-covered map. On Wednesday, stakeholders from Oconee will join nine counties in the region to plan growth in the Upstate over the next two decades.