Oconee's economic resilience rare among rural counties

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee was one of only two Upstate counties where more businesses opened their doors than closed them from 2010-14, according to a report by a nonprofit group focused on American economic development.

Moreover, Oconee was even more of an anomaly as a smaller rural county in terms of its resilience in the wake of the United States' most recent recession, actually experiencing business growth where most counties nationwide with a similar profile were unable to rebound.

"The New Map of Economic Growth and Recovery," from the Economic Innovation Group, surveyed the American economic landscape emerging from the Great Recession and compared it to previous recovery periods.

"This report identifies the geography and strength of job creation

SEE **RESILIENCE.** PAGE **A5**

FROM PAGE A1

and new business formation, as well the overall collapse in the number of new firms in the economy," it states.

According to the EIG, "the 2010s recovery was marked by a collapse in new business formation," and the report found that barely 40 percent of U.S. counties experienced positive business establishment growth in that five-year span.

Making Oconee a further outlier, the report found the vast majority of those counties were concentrated near large urban centers — roughly 20 of the 3,143 U.S. counties counties generated half of the country's new business establishments.

Of South Carolina's 46 counties, just 10 experienced positive business establishment growth, while Greenville County was the Upstate's only other representative on the list. Oconee was the only one of the state's 10 counties to experience positive business establishment growth that did not either include or abut a major statistical area. The other nine counties were Greenville, York, Lancaster, Lexington, Berkeley, Horry, Charleston, Beaufort and Jasper.

Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell told The Journal he believes the county's diverse economy and location are two reasons it persevered through the recession and has flourished since.



Blackwell

"Oconee's economy is blessed to have a strong agribusiness sector, innovative manufacturing sector and growing service economy," Blackwell said. "Not to mention some of the best quality of life attributes in South Carolina with the lakes.

"Then factor in location, as Oconee is also blessed to be on the I-85 corridor, beside Clemson University and in the Upstate of South Carolina. All of this has mattered and has helped Oconee grow steadily over the years while surviving dips in the economy."

Whereas the most recent economic recovery period showed 59 percent of counties saw more businesses close than open, the recovery period from 2002-06 showed only 37 percent of counties saw negative business establishment statistics. From 1992-96, the difference was even more marked: only 17 percent of counties saw more businesses close than open.

"The findings capture an economy veering toward a less broadly dynamic, less entrepreneurial and more geographically concentrated equilibrium — more reliant than ever on a few high-performing geographies abundant in talent and capital to carry national rates of growth," the EIG report surmised. "Even in the relatively short period of time analyzed here, patterns have reversed. Large urban counties dominate where they once lagged, while small counties have nearly disappeared from the map of recovery altogether."

Blackwell said Oconee's economic diversity allowed it to not be solely dependent on any "one sector of our economy."

"As one sector dips, another spikes," he said. "Getting the tourism dollars flowing in our economy, on top of economic development success, mixed in with a growing (and successful) Clemson University with the housing sector rebounding ... well, it is a strong mixture for a solid economy that many other places in the United States would love to have."

Blackwell also said he feels the prospects for more economic growth are strong for Oconee.

"We have a strong, growing manufacturing base," he said, "We have a strong agribusiness sector that is flourishing as more people care about where their food comes from.

"Our lakes are magnets for tourists, and now that Destination Oconee is shining that spotlight even more, it will only mean more good things to come. The housing market is strong here and should continue as our national economy flourishes."

sbradley@upstatetoday.com