Oconee's infrastructure racing to keep up

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WALHALLA — Oconee County's economic landscape is set to change drastically in the near future, and its infrastructure is running a race to keep up with its growth.

That was the collective message of three county department heads who addressed a subcommittee of the county's planning commission that met this week to review its comprehensive plan and current land use map.

Richard Blackwell was first to address the commissioners who comprised the subcommittee Monday, and the Oconee Economic Alliance director offered suggestions to promote future growth.

Blackwell cited Oconee's location on the I-85 corridor and proximity to Greenville, Spartanburg, Charlotte, Atlanta and their respective airports as reasons the county is positioned well economically.

"We are creating awareness that we are Oconee County, South Carolina, and we are open for business," he said. "It may not be next Tuesday, but I guarantee you we will look much different in the next four to five years, if not one to two."

Blackwell pointed to a shortage of affordable housing for the employees coming to the area due to economic expansion as one obstacle Oconee would need to overcome. He also spoke about the importance of zoning to the county's economy and urged the subcommittee to work to ensure industrial and commercial areas are zoned appropriately.

'It will be pretty much like lighting a match in southern Oconee County.'

Richard Blackwell
Economic alliance director



"Some people may hate the 'Z' word, but — I don't want to say it's necessary, but it provides a level of certainty to people that are making multi-million dollar investments," he said.

Of the county's three industrial parks with available space, Blackwell pointed to the Golden Corner Commerce Park near Fair Play as a location with tremendous growth potential.

Blackwell said he expected the growth to begin once the park's sewer is completed by the end of the year.

"It will be pretty much like lighting a match in southern Oconee County," he said. "Fair Play could quickly become a very high-density area as far as development."

Blackwell pointed to the U.S. Highway 123 corridor as the county's "main artery" for commercial development, along with the adjoining Sheep Farm Road and Bountyland areas.

In terms of the county's current land use map, the subcommittee next sought input from county engineer Mack Kelly, who addressed how Oconee's roads and bridges are positioned to keep up with its growth.

Kelly differentiated between private roads, county roads and state roads, and said while funding issues exist in terms of maintaining roads, many of the roads most in need of maintenance are owned by the state.

"As the roads continue to decay and decompose, they are even more expensive to repair," he said. "So as the state looks at it and continues to lack funds to maintain roadways, it's just going to be a bigger and bigger and bigger cost to (address) in the future. And if the state system is bad, that trickles down and makes our system even worse."

Kelly also broached the subject of impact fees, which he believes should at least be considered in the county budget to ensure it can afford the toll economic expansion will take on existing infrastructure.

"When we add a 5,000-person community and we're maintaining that road usage — how are we going to pay for that in 15 years when that road needs maintenance?" he said.

Swain Still, who directs the county's solid waste department, said the county is "fairly well suited for now" in terms of its solid waste efforts, but as economic growth continues, expansion and upgrades would be necessary.

"Our convenience centers as a whole, most of them are adequate, but now they are getting to the point where if there's anymore growth they're going to be overcrowded," he said.

Still said on an average day some of the county's convenience centers handle 1,000 vehicles, and the number could increase to 1,200 at busier centers on weekends.

Those are the convenience centers designed for high-volume use, however, whereas some of the county's more rural centers may not be prepared for the growth that is coming, such as near the industrial park in Fair Play, according to Still.

"There are small centers in those areas," he said. "What you see when you walk into those centers is the amount of land we own. There is no extra land around those. The fence line is the property line, so there is no expansion upon those unless you buy more property."

Recycling is a major benefit to the county's economic health, said Still, who pointed out that Oconee averages a profit of $80 to $100 per ton on recycling, as opposed to paying $30 per ton for solid waste disposal.

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