Official: Oconee job picture looking good

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WALHALLA — Oconee's top economic development official says recent statistics have been "very encouraging" in terms of the county's employment situation.

Oconee Economic Alliance director Richard Blackwell pointed out to county council's planning and economic development committee the good news of Oconee's recent figures — a 15-year-low unemployment rate of 4.5 percent in October and the highest labor participation in the county's history of 33,779 over the summer.

Since 2012, Oconee has seen $271 million in capital investment and 1,100 new jobs lured through economic development efforts. For the year to date, the county has seen four projects announced totaling $89 million in capital investment and 113 new jobs.

This year's projects include three expansions — Nason ($2.5 million, 26 jobs), Sealed Air ($6.77 million, four unannounced jobs) and BASF ($60 million) — and one new project, Baxter Manufacturing and Hi-Tech Mold Carolina's decision to establish operations at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park, a $20.7 million capital investment that will create 87 new jobs.

Blackwell pointed to the county having a "pad-ready site" available for the project at the OITP as a primary reason Oconee landed the project.

"The reason that site won the day, so to speak, is speed to market. ... Without that pad, they wouldn't be here," he said.

Blackwell said the Baxter/Hi-Tech building is nearly done, and the company will begin hiring and making products for BMW in early 2017.

"The good news is we have record unemployment (and) record labor participation in Oconee County," he said. "So we're seeing the good things — low on one side, high on the other. That's what you want to see. So it's very encouraging. And you see 87 new jobs coming online in 2017, so that number is theoretically only going to go up as far as labor participation."

Blackwell said workforce training would be crucial for Oconee to continue its recent success.

"We need people with skills to take the jobs that not only we're recruiting, but also the jobs that have been here for a long time like at Johnson Controls and ITT," he said. "We have 60 manufacturers in the community; some of those people are going to experience retirements. We need to get people in those jobs. There are jobs here in Oconee County, but no longer can you just walk in with a high-school diploma and say, 'I'm here to work.'"

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