Officials: New ag center to be self-sufficient

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALHALLA — At a cost of almost $7 million, proponents of an agricultural center midway between Seneca and Westminster on U.S. 123 are confident that if Oconee County builds it, people will come.

Going by the name Foothills Agricultural Resource and Marketing (FARM) center, the project is fourth in order of priority among 10 projects voters are being asked to pay for by approving a capital sales tax increase referendum in the Nov. 4 general election.

Many of the same people who started the South Carolina Foothills Heritage Fair in 2009, and have nurtured it into a popular and successful venture, are promoting the FARM center. Organizers say the fair has put more than $30,000 back into the community in

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the form of scholarships to Oconee students and donations to nonprofit organizations.

The organization has also made a name for itself by annually staging the Steak in Oconee event that promotes local agriculture in the county. This year's Steak in Oconee will take place Monday from 5:30-7:30 p.m. Organizers have changed the location of the event to West Oak High School from its outdoor venue on U.S. Highway 123 because of the possibility of rain.

FARM promoters are confident they can turn the ag center proposition into a thriving, self-sustaining operation that won't be relying on public funding once the complex is built.

"We want to be self-sustaining and we think we will," Heritage Fair president Stan Gibson said. "One of the things we're doing is setting aside 10 percent of our budget for operations, and that's going to let us get up to speed for two or three years, and by then we feel like everything is going to roll."

Gibson said that by hosting events and activities and renting the facilities to other organizations, the ag center would qualify for accommodations tax (ATAX) money because it would be attracting visitors to Oconee. However, he said the facility would not require regular county funds or employees to operate.

"We're in no way looking to come back to the taxpayers and say, 'oops, we boo-booed, we want more money,'" Gibson said.

Gwen McPhail, who also helped get the Heritage Fair off the ground, said the FARM center would provide marketing opportunities for local farmers and be an educational resource in the community.

During a forum on the sales tax referendum in Walhalla on Friday, McPhail told the story of two friends who turned a garden plot just outside Westminster into a money-making venture.

"This year they were the largest onion producer in South Carolina," she said.

The FARM center would also feature permanent fairgrounds for the Heritage Fair and a covered arena with permanent seating for 3,000 guests that could double its seating capacity if needed. Another permanent fixture of the complex would be a farmers market building that could hold up to 90 vendors, as well as a commercial kitchen to be used to cater events at the FARM center.

The center would also have a livestock barn, as well as a cannery and honey processing facility.

McPhail said FARM center officials hope to be able to pull in a lot of business that the Garrison Arena in Clemson turns away. She said it would also fill a niche for the smaller events that currently have no venue in the area.

"The heritage fair already is a self-sustaining entity, and we feel this will be, too," McPhail said.

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