

Officials: Oconee economy poised for solid 2016

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALTHAM — County officials have every right to feel a little giddy heading into the New Year, as they're about to close the books on 2015 with all economic indicators pointing in the right direction after a year of solid growth.

What has these same officials excited is that barring any unforeseen hiccups in the U.S. and global economies, 2016 might be as strong if not stronger than the year that's about to become history.

"2015 has been very good to Oconee County," Richard Blackwell, head of the county's economic development office, recently told members of county council.

Blackwell was all too happy to check off the 2015 achievements — more than 426 new jobs, eclipsing the number over the two previous years; \$53 million on county investments, which boosts the total over three years to \$188 million; and more than 390,000 square feet of new development, of which almost half has been occupied.

"There's a few real estate agencies that's made some money in our community as well," Blackwell said.

The strong-performing local economy dropped the county's unemployment rate in November to 5.2 percent, a number that Blackwell called "close to record lows."

"We're seeing record numbers of people working in our county — more than has been working in the textile heydays or whatever old story you want to talk about when things were good," Blackwell added. "Well, things are very good here in Oconee County. But again, we can always do better and that's where we're focused on."

From his vantage point as the county's dep-

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ty director of community development, Josh Stephens tracks permits and inspections. He likes where the county is headed.

"We're handling a high number of inspections every day, which is a little unusual for this part of the year, but I'll take it because it means things are going well on the development front," Stephens said.

The county is prepping for big projects to come on line, Stephens said, pointing to the 300,000-square-foot commercial and retail complex called Hartwell Village at the site of the former Milliken textile plant at the intersection of U.S. Highway 123 and S.C. Highway 93.

NewSpring Church bought the property in late 2013 and flipped about 42 acres to commercial devel-

oper Casto, which is behind the Hartwell Village project. NewSpring is building a new worship center on adjacent property.

"We're currently reviewing plans for NewSpring church," Stephens said. "We are reviewing and going to be approving very quickly the overall site plan for Hartwell Village so they can begin grading and other site work."

Blackwell predicts Hartwell Village will become reality in two years.

"I know there's going to be a new hotel, a movie theater and 300,000 square feet of new retail and restaurant space," Blackwell said. "That is a real great retail center for Oconee County, and it's going to continue to make our quality of life the best in South Carolina."

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