Officials push task force for Project North

Panel would chart course on Highway 11 property

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee officials are inclined to set up a special advisory group to help guide development of the 415-acre Highway 11 tract purchased as Project North.


Corbeil

Tom Markovich, an official with the Homebuilders Association of Oconee, suggested during council's public comments this week that a task force be created. He said the advisory group should be comprised of people involved in economic development and tourism.

"This property is much too valuable to just turn it into an industrial park," Markovich said.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said the county would close on the $2.5 million deal by the end of the month.

Councilman Paul Corbeil said he's already been circulating an outline of a plan for the property that includes forming an advisory board.

"That advisory group would not be a short-term fix of 30, 60 or 90 days," Corbeil added. "It would stay there during the development process."

Councilman Joel Thrift said he is thinking along the same lines.

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"It is my hope that we appoint a blue ribbon panel, just as we did with the sewer project ..." Thrift said. "This will be addressed in the beginning of the year."

Council members dove into a spirited discussion on Project North at the tail end of this week's meeting when District 2 Councilman Wayne McCall introduced a motion recommending that marketing and sale of the property be put into the hands of a professional firm working on commission.

Corbeil seconded the motion for the sake of discussion.

"I think that's the way we ought to go with this," McCall said. "Let's bring in a professional and let's market this thing. Otherwise, it's going to be like the hayfield ... we're sitting on it and sitting on it."

McCall's hayfield is a direct reference to the Golden Corner Commerce Park site in Fair Play that's gone undeveloped since a previous council spent more than $2 million on 400 acres.

Corbeil said he did not have problems with McCall's suggestion but did not think the time is right.

"It's premature for us to tie our hands before we have a plan done to decide how exactly we're going to sell ..." Corbeil said.

Thrift said that before any marketing is done engineers would have to figure out the best point of entry for sewer and water into the property. He said Walhalla and Westminster officials have agreed to jointly put water and sewer to the property line at no cost to the county.

"But it's got to be in the proper place so it doesn't cost an arm and a leg to run it throughout the property," Thrift added.

Even Councilman Mario Suarez, participating in his final regular council meeting before leaving office, landed a parting shot at McCall's suggestion.

"What I don't understand is, Wayne, you voted against the project," he said. "Now you want to go very, very fast. I don't understand."

McCall responded vehemently: "Look, we've tied up $2.5 million of the taxpayers' money. Whether I voted for it or not, I'm still responsible for those taxpayers."

Taken to a vote, McCall's motion was defeated.

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