Pickens considers return to alliance

MIKE EADS
MICHAEL.EADS@INDEPENDENTMAIL.COM

It sounds like Pickens County's new leadership wants to reconnect with an old alliance.

New County Council members used a committee meeting Tuesday night to tout the benefits of rejoining the Upstate SC Alliance, the economic development group based in Greenville that markets the region to national and international manufacturing companies. A vote on the move is expected when the council meets again on March 6.

They think the move would be good public relations for a county notorious in recent years for governmental dysfunction.

"There's been a changing of the guard, and the word now is that 'Pickens is open for business,' " District 3 Councilman Wes Hendricks told colleagues. "There's a positive attitude and we have a better reputation now with the players in Columbia and elsewhere."

The County Council pulled out of the Upstate group in 2012, choosing to forego the annual fees of more than $50,000 and rely on its own Alliance Pickens marketing effort. Upstate SC Alliance is funded with membership fees from public and private sources around the Upstate, including the city of Easley, Clemson University and Baptist Easley Hospital — all located in Pickens County.

Trey Whitehurst, the sole remaining council member who supported that exit, all but called the Upstate SC Alliance a waste of money at Tuesday's meeting. He said Alliance Pickens Executive Director Ray Farley has brought new businesses — Adidas, era-contact USA and others — to the county's commerce park near Liberty and a rapprochement is unnecessary.

"We got more jobs and industry than we did when we were in the Upstate Alliance," Whitehurst insisted. "I'm not going to vote in favor of this."

Whitehurst said he believes the county would be competing with Greenville city and county for jobs, whether it pays for Upstate SC Alliance membership or not.

Councilman Roy Costner disagreed, saying the Upstate group would only help Farley do his job better.

"This man (Farley) is awesome at his job and has generated a terrific return on investment in his time," said Costner, who represents District 4. "The sense I've got is that we joined the Upstate Alliance, but then we didn't do a lot with it, except

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for Ray ... it needs to be all of us. The CEOs I've talked to in the commerce park all said the same thing to me: it's important that you be a part of the Upstate Alliance."

Farley credited his recent successes in part to the old council paying for pad-ready sites within the commerce park, inventory he didn't have to market to prospects back when Pickens County was last part of the Upstate SC Alliance. He cautioned, however, that rejoining the group probably won't land Pickens County anything like BMW's huge manufacturing facility in Greer.

"I would recommend that you would rejoin, but I would recommend that you manage your expectations and why it is you want to become a member again," Farley said.

Whatever those expectations may be, Upstate SC Alliance President and CEO John Lummus said Wednesday that Pickens County would be welcomed back with open arms.

"The Upstate SC Alliance is excited about the possibility of Pickens County rejoining our regional economic development effort, and we are hopeful they will come on board in the near future," said Lummus. "Pickens County has a strong economy, workforce and existing industry base, and their participation strengthens the region."

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