Planners face tough zoning decision

Church wants its Lake Keowee property left 'Control Free'

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — A rezoning petition on Lake Keowee that includes church property parishioners want to keep as "Control Free" is headed back before the Oconee County Planning Commission.

Planners will listen to public comments at their meeting Monday night on the rezoning request before making a recommendation to County Council.

The rezoning request — referred to as the "Biggerstaff petition" — consists of 457 parcels totaling 570 acres in the vicinity of Biggerstaff Road.

Mike Smith, who submitted the Biggerstaff petition, said the primary purpose is to protect lakefront properties "from uncontrolled development." As petitioned, the parcels would be rezoned into the Residential District, Lake Residential District and the Agricultural Residential District.

St. John's Lutheran Church in Walhalla, which owns 5 acres of lakefront property that falls within the area to be rezoned, wants to be excluded from the petition.

Attorney Larry Brandt, a member of St. John's, is representing the church before the Planning commission.

Brandt told Planning Commission members at a meeting in April that the church wants to keep its Biggerstaff property zoned as Control Free District. According to Brandt, the church wants to someday build a retreat center at the site, but has no formal plans or designs prepared yet.

The church acquired the Lake Keowee property as a gift in 1980. The church allows the property to be used for day trips, overnight camping, special services, baptisms and weddings by groups of all denominations. At one time there was talk of building a lodge and activity center on the property, estimated to cost almost $4 million.

Smith is asking the Planning Commission to approve the petition as submitted and not leave any holes in the rezoned area."

IF YOU GO

What: Oconee County Planning Commission
When: 6 p.m. Monday
Where: County Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St., Walhalla



FILE PHOTO

The scenic 5-acre property on Lake Keowee off of Biggerstaff Road owned by St. John's Lutheran Church is at the center of a controversial rezoning petition that comes before the Oconee County Planning Commission on Monday. The church wants its land to remain Control Free.

Planning Commission Chairman Ryan Honea said the Biggerstaff petition came through before the recent approval of changes to Oconee's zoning law. Honea said the petition would not have met a new higher threshold requiring the signatures of 51 percent of all parcel owners and 75 percent of the land.

Honea admits the Planning Commission faces a tough decision Monday.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-2375, ext. 156