Project North has been kicked around for years

Oconee first considered Highway 11 purchase in 2004

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WALHALLA — For some, the idea of Oconee County buying 415 acres on Highway 11 for a mixed-use recreational and industrial facility appears to have popped out of leftfield.

However, the idea is, in fact, not new at all and has been debated by assorted council members for years.

Former County Council Chairman Frank Ables said this week he recalls council looking at the property in 2004.

"We were mainly discussing it as an aquatic center or recreation facility," Ables said, adding that he envisioned the Highway 11 property to used for recreation from the get-go.

Former Councilman Steven Moore said he too was on council in 2004 when the Project North property surfaced.

SEE PROJECT, PAGE A5

"The Fair Play property (for the Golden Corner Commerce Park) and this property were brought up at the same time," Moore said. "In fact, it was brought up as an alternative to the Fair Play property."

Moore said council eventually made the decision to make industrial development along the Interstate 85 corridor a priority.

The Highway 11 property seemingly slipped into oblivion until it was resurrected this summer.

County officials presented conceptual plans for Project North last week that included the building, over time, of baseball and soccer fields, a civic center and amphitheater and other amenities.

Asked how much it would cost to build such recreational facilities, County Administrator Scott Moulder ventured to guess the price could run into the tens of millions of dollars, if done right.

The plan also includes using half of the 415 acres as a site to attract industry, and, since that initial presentation, several councilmen have gone out of their way to say they see Project North as an industrial, job-creation project, not a recreation-first venture.

Every person on council agrees that the property is a great buy for the county at $2.5 million because, as Council Chairman Reg Dexter puts it, "sewer, water and power are very close to the Project North property."

Also, every council member, including Wayne McCall who has twice voted against buying the property for lack of concrete plans for using it, agrees that the property could be developed quickly, beginning, perhaps, within two years.

Public hearing Tuesday

What Do You Think?

Vote your feelings about **Project North** in our online poll at

Oconee County is one vote away from purchasing 415 acres on SC Highway 11 for $2.5 million. The cost of the recreation portion of the plan has been estimated at $30 million. What do you think?
- ☐ Yes, go for it.
- ☐ Yes, but wait to develop.
- ☐ No; get an affordable plan before buying.
- ☐ No; no more land buys.

upstatetoday.com
(No registration needed.)

The project, however, has not been without controversy, even within council.

McCall and Councilman Paul Corbeil want the emphasis in Project North to be industry and job creation. Dexter, and Councilmen Mario Suarez and Joel Thrift contend that having recreational facilities on the site would help attract industries and the jobs that McCall and Corbeil insist should be the priority.

Corbeil is so adamant in his position that he said Wednesday he would vote against the Project North purchase if the emphasis is put on developing the recreational facilities.

The public gets the chance to share its views during a public hearing Tuesday night on the proposed Project North purchase. Council is expected to take a final vote that night also.

Andrew Moore contributed to this article.

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Project North timeline

- **July 20:** Council came out of executive session at 9:06 p.m. and approved by a 4-0 vote the first reading of Ordinance 2010-29. The ordinance authorizes due diligence work for the purchase of three parcels, which are not identified. The motion to approve the ordinance was presented by Councilman Wayne McCall.
- **Aug. 3:** Council unanimously approves on second reading Ordinance 2010-29. Prior to the vote citizens voiced opposition to the ordinance on various grounds, including the lack of specific information about the properties, the costs and future uses.
- **Aug. 14:** Council holds a special Saturday morning meeting at which the three properties related to Ordinance 2010-29 are identified as the Propex facility in Seneca, a residential lot in Walhalla needed for the new jail project and 415 acres on Highway 11 called Project North. Council also decides to take Project North out of Ordinance 2010-29 and deal with it in a separate ordinance after Councilman Joel Thrift said he's been a lifelong friend of the current property owner. Thrift said that for appearances sake, he would not cast a vote on whether to buy Project North.
- **Sept. 7:** Council approves first reading of Ordinance 2010-31 — dealing with Project North by a 3-1 vote. Thrift did not vote and McCall voted against it because he said there was no plan for using the property.
- **Sept. 18:** Council holds another Saturday morning meeting to talk about Project North. Lake Keowee retiree George Eichler gives a presentation about John's Creek Technology Park, which developed a successful model for mixing recreational and industrial facilities. The John's Creek model projects five jobs created for every acre developed.
- **Oct. 5:** Council approves second reading of Ordinance 2010-31 — dealing with Project North — by a 3-1 vote. Again, Thrift recuses and McCall is opposed.
- **Nov. 9:** County officials unveil conceptual plans for Project North, which include baseball and soccer fields, amphitheater and civic center.
- **Nov. 23:** Council agenda includes public hearing and a final vote on Project North.