

'Project of passion'

Keowee social club, winery up for final approval tonight

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — County council can give final approval tonight to the first property zoned into planned development district in Oconee: a private social club and public winery on Lake Keowee. After a public hearing at today's 6 p.m. meeting, council is slated to take third and final reading of an ordinance that would amend the county zoning map for a PDD from the Gardiner Group, headed by Greenville-based developer Russ Gardiner.

State law states "to allow flexibility in development ... the local governing authority may provide for the establishment of planned development districts as amendments to a locally adopted zoning ordinance and official zoning map."

Gardiner, who retired from California to Greenville, sat down with The Journal recently to discuss the plans and said when he found the property he knew "it was the most perfect spot."

The property consists of 436 acres, and the plan

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The 15,000-square-foot clubhouse at The Equus Club at Lake Keowee will have an "Appalachian rustic elegance" architecture theme in keeping with the county's tourism marketing plan, "Destination Oconee."

PROJECT: 'It is the hope of this club to bring winemaking back'

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calls for two separate and distinct projects: a private, 500-member social club called The Equus Club at Keowee and Lake Keowee Winery, which will be open to the public.

First, on 335 acres, will be the private social club focused on winemaking, culinary experiences and equestrian experiences for 500 members.

"It is the hope of this club to bring winemaking back to Oconee County," Gardiner said. "What many people don't know about is back in the 1880s, there were about 11 families — primarily in Walhalla — that created in this area one of the largest wine-growing regions in the entire United States, and also wine-producing.

"Prohibition killed it, and it never came back."

Gardiner hopes to keep 75 percent of the property as open space. Twenty percent of the property will be residential, while 5 percent is planned to be commercial, including the clubhouse, fitness center and wine-production area.

The Equus Club will be set up as a 501(c)(7) tax-exempt social club, whereby the members of the club actually own the club.

"This has been a vision of mine for several years," he said. "It's a project of passion."

Gardiner said the plan is for the public announcement for membership to be Dec. 1, although a pre-announcement letter will be sent to potential members who have been identified in advance.

The Equus Club will be funded by the first 500 equity members paying an initiation fee of \$28,500, raising \$14,250,000 to

allow the club to be fully funded with no debt.

Lake Keowee Winery, meanwhile, will have an identical wine-production facility, as well as a cooking school and pavilion for weddings and other events.

The public winery will feature 20 lake cottages — 10 per phase — on the property for visitors, as well as an outdoor amphitheater and botanical gardens.

"It then becomes kind of a destination that gives us a lot of amenities for tourists coming to the area," Gardiner said.

Gardiner said the design of both projects would be "Appalachian rustic elegance" in keeping with the new Oconee County building-codes plan, dubbed "Destination Oconee."

When the matter came before the Oconee County Planning Commission last month, a handful of speakers came to the meeting to speak out against the PDD, saying it violated the county's lake overlay district.

"That overlay should be sacrosanct," former commissioner Andy Heller said. "If you negate it, this will open the floodgates."

But county zoning administrator Josh Stephens said the purpose of a PDD is to allow developers

flexibility to create the product they want.

"The point of the PDD is to get one approval at one time for everything," he said.

Gardiner said while he understood concerns about the lake overlay district, the reality was his development would have less homes, docks and impact to the shoreline than some adjacent properties zoned residential.

The property will include a 50-foot buffer from the lake, according to Gardiner, and the largest building, the 15,000-square-foot clubhouse, would be almost 300 feet from the water.

"There are a lot of 7,000-square-foot homes on the lake that are a lot closer than 300 feet from the water," he said. "So we have purposely placed our buildings to not be an eyesore."

Gardiner said representatives of the club met with Duke Energy and were told they could build "a minimum of seven or eight docks," but only have plans to build two.

"We've got one dock for the Equus Club, and we've got one dock for Lake Keowee Winery," he said. "That's all we want, because we don't want to clutter up the shoreline."

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