Recap of look at economic development

Over the past several days, the Daily Journal/Messenger has presented a series of stories regarding economic development in Oconee County. This series has been driven by the reality that, in the next several weeks, the Oconee County Council faces key decisions on whether to fund two projects that are at the core of the county's current economic development plan.

Following is a summary of what we have learned:

Last Saturday: The big ticket choices soon confronting County Council include a request for $1.8 million for a second county-financed spec building and $4.3 million for phase one of sewer infrastructure at the county's Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) north of Fair Play. Given the magnitude of these projects and the funding available, these two decisions — particularly the GCCP — will likely set the tone for economic development in the county for years to come.

Tuesday: Economic Development officials point to the "success" of the county's first spec building when arguing their case for building a second such building. Economic development officials statewide agree on the value of spec buildings. However, many of them, including some of the most successful, say private, not public, funding is the way to go. They point to the fact that private developers are more driven to see that the speculation pays off sooner. Empty buildings in the county have been deemed largely unusable because of their condition or structural designs. Some counties are using innovative approaches such as Laurens, where the county, to prep a development site that is being marketed via a virtual building design, has spent less than $300,000.

Wednesday: Oconee County has been trying to reel in industry for decades. The 1980s proved to be the biggest boom period with several firms setting up shop, citing the availability of a well-trained, motivated and affordable work force. Recent years have witnessed fewer new businesses and local economic development officials have had to shift their focus to aiding existing firms with potential expansions. Again, those officials emphasize the need to develop land and building inventory to show potential industrialists.

Thursday: Some in the local community have suggested the county should focus less on attracting new industry and more on saving existing plants and jobs. Oconee County has no formal job retention program and therefore benefits little from available state and federal job retention funds. Legal officials say using county tax funds to assist firms to weather the current recession might be possible but is largely an untested use of public money. Again, some experts suggest private-public partnerships are a more feasible approach.

Friday: Times have changed. When it comes to attracting industry, Oconee no longer competes with other counties or even neighboring states. Today, the battle for plants and jobs is waged internationally. Many existing firms are owned by foreign or out-state interests. Competing is simply more difficult. However, the county remains focused on industry, the local economic development director saying flatly that he provides primarily information only for possible commercial interests and leaves tourism development to the newly formed Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Looking ahead:

- *Can anything be done to help local communities fill empty storefronts? Should the county have a role in retail and commercial development? How and who would such an initiative be funded?*
- *Much of Oconee's growth over the past 10 years has resulted from a northern migration, led largely by retirees. Is this a viable avenue of economic development and should the county play a role in it?*
- *What do the current County Council members think about economic development efforts today and what do they feel the focus should be moving forward?*

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