Friday, July 3, 2009 Daily Journal • Daily Messenger

Revised plan focuses on economic development

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WALHALLA — Oconee County set 11 Comprehensive Plan goals for economic development and priority investment in 2004. Fortunately, or unfortunately, most of them appear to be renewable goals five years later.

That was the general sentiment expressed by some 18 people who turned out for the latest stakeholder meeting on the county's mandatory Comprehensive Plan update.

Three in the crowd were Economic Development Commission representatives, two were planning board members and two were media reps.

"I didn't hear anything major in terms of new directions," Planning Director Art Holbrooks said. "It was more refocusing on certain aspects."

The 2004 goals included:

- Complete and adopt an infrastructure master plan
- Identify, secure and develop property for county-owned industrial development;
- Continue airport upgrades
- Improve communication and cooperation between county and municipal governments
- Guarantee adequate water supplies and distribution
- Improve and expand wastewater treatment
- Prepare a transportation plan that will meet needs for 30 years
- Develop a planning process for land use and economic development
- Expand tourism revenue
- Renew and expand agribusiness opportunities

While a few goals, such as securing land for industrial development and drafting a master plan for infrastructure, and some specific action plans have been attained, the consensus was that many of the goals simply need to be adjusted and carried on in the new draft.

Resident Gary Owens summarized a rambling discussion by asking, "What do we want to draw in to generate high paying jobs in the future?"

Specific suggestions from stakeholders included considering the establishment of tax increment financing (TIF) districts to support sewer and water development. TIFs allow government to capture the taxes on new development within a specific area so that money can be used to develop infrastructure in that area.

Holbrooks said all suggestions will be formulated into draft goals or actions plans for review by the public and the Planning Commission.

Holbrooks hopes to have all segments of the Comprehensive Plan addressed by stakeholders by mid-August so that planners can begin final action on various chapters of the plan.