Spec building marks shift in policy

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$1.5M project part of county's economic development initiative

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WALHALLA — The Oconee County Council is poised to inject almost $3 million into economic development initiatives, including $1.5 million for a spec building.

Funding for the capital projects would be included in the $42 million proposed fiscal 2010-11 budget that council began massaging this week.

The endorsement marked a shift in policy with regards to the shell building.

Jim Alexander, the Economic Development Commission director, attended Thursday night's budget meeting in which he emphatically pitched the need for a shell building at the Highway 11 Commerce Center.

"We need to show products because people are looking now," Alexander said.

Councilman Paul Corbeil, a staunch supporter of having a spec building to entice new business, endorsed the idea again.

Corbeil said there is a risk to building a shell building, but indicated doing nothing would guarantee that desperately needed jobs would not be created.

This time around, Council Chair Reg Dexter and Vice Chair Joel Thrift aligned with Corbeil.

"We have to be decisive," Thrift said. "We have the money to do it; let's do it."

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Dexter said there is $730,000 from utility tax credits that could be used toward the spec building.

"We'll lose the utility tax money if we don't use it," he said.

Councilman Wayne McCall, who last year declared the idea of another spec building as being dead, found himself on the short end of the stick this time.

Oconee's first spec building at the Commerce Center sold after being on the market 23 months, which was less than the national average of about three years. Lift Technologies invested more than $3.2 million to expand the spec building and add new jobs.

Council also earmarked just over $1 million to make road improvements in and out of the proposed Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) just off Highway 59 near Fair Play.

Officials also approved $400,000 to purchase rail land for development.

Council held off addressing funding of a sewer plant at GCCP, which still needs permit approval from the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). The cost estimate for building the sewer plant and extending lines to Interstate 85 interchanges is $6.6 million.