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Through the haze leaders see bright future

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By Brett McLaughlin (Contact / Staff Bio)
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Oconee County's view of the future may be temporarily obstructed by a recessionary haze, but people whose job it is to look beyond the present remain convinced that the sun eventually will shine once more … and brightly at that.

Whether discussing the general demographics of the county, the future of Oconee's educational system or what commercial and industrial activity may be around the bend, the consensus is that at the end of this recession Oconee will pick up right where it left off just over a year ago.

Between 2000 and 2008, more than 115,000 people moved to South Carolina's 10-county Upstate region. Five thousand of them settled in Oconee County.

Over that same period of time, retail sales in the county climbed by $136,000. By 2008, however, the first signs of a housing market slowdown were surfacing, and the county's retail sales actually dipped from 2007 to 2008, falling for the first time in seven years from $1,194,228 to $1,112,617.

Photo

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Jessica Nelms

Despite a deep national recession, some construction continues in the Upstate, including residential home construction on Lake Keowee. Leaders expect a flurry of activity when the recession ends.

That decline and a likely decline when 2009 figures are reported are considered by most experts to be an aberration attributable directly to the recession now gripping the country. When the current slowdown ends — and all are convinced it will end — those same experts predict a new flurry of economic development.

"We know it will break loose and so do our industrial partners. It's just a matter of when," commented Oconee Economic Development Director Jim Alexander. "Once we get through this period, whether it's 6, 12 or 18 months, we are going to see a flurry of activity."

And, while Alexander remains optimistic, he also remains concerned that the county will not keep planning for its future.

"We're keeping in touch with the industrial folks and, while there have been some jobs lost, they are doing a great job hanging on to the jobs they still have.

"There are still people looking," he continued. "Firms are planning for the future, and that's the key for us."

Alexander remains adamant that the county needs to move forward with the construction of a spec building, saying that many of the vacant mill buildings and other former industrial sites in the county simply do not meet the needs of modern producers.

"We have to have product and that means facilities and sites," he said, adding that infrastructure development is also crucial.

"We need to be prepared to get water, sewer and natural gas to whoever needs it," Alexander said.

Oconee County Council Chairman Reg Dexter agrees.

"Infrastructure is going to be the key," said Dexter, who will lead a workshop session Tuesday on infrastructure needs in the southern part of the county.

"There are two very different groups," Dexter said. "There are the folks who are moving here who are empty-nesters. They are buyers.

"But, the group you really need is the young people, couples and young families. To get them, we need jobs, and to get jobs, we need infrastructure," he continued.

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Dexter and Alexander not only agree that development along the county's Interstate-85 corridor is necessary, but they are also in sync that growth on that 4-mile stretch may well be as much commercial as industrial.

"The potential for our few miles of I-85 is fantastic," Alexander said, "commercial as well as industrial."

However, Alexander keeps coming back to the point that private business no longer sees infrastructure as part of its responsibility. Rather, it looks to government, and the Oconee development director wants to be ready and waiting.

"We have a good, trainable workforce and while we are in this lull we need to support efforts to retrain our workforce and update the skills of our workers."

"We have a golden opportunity," he said. "We just need to better our skills and have product.

Education in the mix

To that end, Oconee School Superintendent Michael Lucas is fighting through current funding dilemmas at the state to see that county graduates are prepared to join the workforce or to pursue college degrees.

"Our instructional program is working," he said. "We are just trying to tweak a few things as far as teaching techniques and implementing new strategies so the needs of all students are addressed."

In many ways, Lucas said, Oconee County is in a better position than other school districts in that while the county's population has grown dramatically, the school-age population has been unchanged for nearly four decades.

"There is no problem with local or national funding," he said. "We are in great shape. The tax base has been growing and that has allowed us to maintain our buildings and have greater stability.

"We are among the leaders in the state with student performance, and our teachers have been critical to that success," he added, noting that the district has emphasized teacher training and the introduction of the latest technology.

Lucas said the shift away from property tax to sales tax for funding education threatens the future stability of districts like Oconee, which the state considers a "wealthy district."

"The tax basis is crumbling. Sales tax is not a stable form of funding. Tax reform is needed," he said.

"All children do not cost the same to educate, and I'm afraid we are going to see a redistribution of wealth," Lucas said. "Oconee may be a wealthy district, but we do not have wealthy children. Many of our children have limited resources, and they are expensive to educate."

Two-thirds of Oconee's graduates, Lucas estimated, require technical education as opposed to a college entrance education.

There is, however, a very big, educational upside to having empty-nesters moving to Oconee County. Lucas said retired people have time, and many of Oconee's retirees are using that time to assist the school. Some are mentors to students. Others offer students exposure to the arts and activities they might never experience.

If the future of school funding is in question, the future for cross-generational education would appear to be bright, as soon as the haze lifts and Oconee's growth resumes.

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