Vision plan back on track for Oconee County

Stakeholders to tackle water conservation, wellness and improving graduation rate

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WALHALLA — Oconee by Choice vision plan stakeholders are getting ready to roll up their collective sleeves and start working on three specific goals that would make a positive impact in the community.

In the coming days and weeks, organizers will be revealing plans to promote water conservation, wellness and increasing the high school graduation rate.

Oconee Alliance Executive Director Jim Gadd said Monday that the initiative comes after a recent meeting at which county and municipal elected officials reiterated their commitment to Oconee's 2008-2028 vision plan.

Gadd said an initial meeting with County Council Chairman Reg Dexter got the ball rolling.

"(Dexter) felt good with what we were doing," Gadd said.

Gadd followed up the meeting by sitting down last week with officials from Seneca, Salem, Westminster and West Union. Gadd spoke later with the mayor of Walhalla, who was unable to attend the meeting.

"We told them we wanted to make something happen with vision," Gadd said. "We're doing something with implementation, and they endorsed it."

Dexter said the group looked at the dozens of goals contained in the vision plan and decided to tackle three specific areas where progress could readily be measured.

Walhalla resident Alice Wald will head the water conservation effort. Despite a rainy April, Oconee remains in the moderate drought category. State officials warn that Oconee and other counties recently downgraded from severe drought still have low groundwater levels that have not recharged completely.

Hunter Kome, vice president of operations at Oconee Medical Center, will spearhead the wellness effort by promoting healthy choices and emphasizing prevention.

Kome said that among other things, his group would propose making fitness resources more accessible and visible by marking trails and erecting signs, add fitness events and resources through grants and public and private initiatives and promoting fitness opportunities through Web sites and a printed calendar of fitness events.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention obesity costs the nation $120 billion annually in additional healthcare expense.

Michael Thorsland, assistant superintendent of operations and administration for the School District of Oconee County, will tackle the goal of increasing the high school graduation rate, which currently is below 80 percent.

Gadd said one idea being floated is finding people in the community willing to participate in a mentoring program to help struggling students obtain their high school diploma.

"They are our leaders, they are chairing the effort but it'll take a lot of effort from many volunteers to get it done and get it done right," Gadd said.

On Thursday, Gadd will recap his recent meetings with elected officials during a gathering of stakeholders committed to preserving Oconee's natural resources and environment. The 7 p.m. meeting will be held at the Oconee Heritage Center across from the courthouse and behind Bantam Chef in Walhalla.