$60M student housing project not done deal

Official updates Oconee economic developments

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WESTMINSTER — A $60 million student housing complex for Clemson University students that would be located in Oconee is "not a done deal," according to the county's top economic developer.

"They are under a purchase option, but it is not closed," Richard Blackwell told the Oconee Economic Alliance board last week at its quarterly meeting.

According to the director's report Blackwell presented to his board, county officials have held ongoing meetings with the leadership of Project Entry — the code name given the project during negotiations — concerning their plans for Oconee.

The project, which Blackwell said would be back in front of county council in the near future, refers to an academic village — "which is a fun way of saying 'a lot of student housing,'" he said — on the U.S. Highway 123 corridor near Clemson.

"We coordinated meetings with Clemson University concerning details of the plans and Norfolk Southern," Blackwell said in his report. "This will be a 'not less than $60 million development tha will be a catalyst for (U.S.) 123."

When an incentive package for the project came before county council last month, council balked at proceeding with the ordinance and approved a motion to direct county administrator Scott Moulder to continue negotiating terms with the company.

In other economic developments, Blackwell said that Baxter Manufacturing is "well up and running" at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park on S.C. Highway 11. Two employees, including a plant manager, have been hired, and a grand opening ceremony is slated for this summer.

The company plans to hire about 90 employees during its hiring process, which is set to begin in May, according to Blackwell.

Also located in the OITP, and adjacent to Baxter, is the planned Oconee County Workforce Development Center, which will include a Tri-County Technical College satellite campus.

Blackwell said the campus would be a "way to differentiate (Oconee) from everybody else."

The OEA director said grading work recently approved by county council would yield a little more than 100 acres of "product to sell to potential clients."

"You're going to see dirt start moving in 30 days, or probably 45 days at the most," he said.

Blackwell said the alliance is expecting three new economic development projects that would be announced within "the next couple weeks or maybe a month or two at the most."

Project Goggles, which passed second reading in front of council last week, is an existing company in Oconee that Blackwell said, "is really an exciting project."

"I hope that when you do see the official announcement from the Department of Commerce, take pride in it — more so that it's going to keep a company here that's been here since 1953," he said. "It was probably the one company that I lost sleep over, meaning that it's always been one that's kind of on the brink of essentially closing."

The county competed for the project with a county in Florida and was able to keep the company in Oconee, according to Blackwell.

"That deal will transform that facility from its today use to more of an e-commerce fulfillment center," he said. "So when you order that product that they make, online, it's going come out of that facility pretty quickly."

Project Goggles will yield about 15 to 20 new jobs and keep roughly 60 jobs in the county, Blackwell said.

Project Raven is another project Blackwell said the OEA had been "working hard on for about three years dealing with a lot of 'what ifs' from the company's leadership."

While the company's facility in Oconee was never in jeopardy, its management was interested in how to position the facility for continued growth from a corporate standpoint, according to Blackwell, who expects the project to go in front of county council at its first meeting in April.

"They actually closed their facility in another state, in Kentucky, and they're moving that entire business line here — and it's a different business line," he said. "They make smart meters and electricity measuring devices. This new product will be another element to their business. It will yield some new jobs, but they're still trying to figure out how many."

A third project, Project Hawk, is expected to be announced "any day now," Blackwell said. The project is in reference to a business line being moved from Indiana and for which Blackwell said the county beat out an incentive package in Mexico.

The project will yield both new jobs and new capital investment, Blackwell said.

Blackwell also noted the building that formerly housed the Covidien plant is under contract, though he noted it was by an investor and not a company.

"But they are buying that building, so ... Medtronic, the parent company of Covidien, is going to be selling that building," he said. "It should close April 10, I'm told. They are also buying some land around it, so that little area there is going to change."

Blackwell said about 60,000-70,000 square feet at the former Dunlop/TaylorMade site in Westminster had been leased for the next two years.

"It will have employees; it's not just a warehouse — it will have a distribution element to it," he said.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com