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**OCONEE ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT ON
UNPRECEDENTED RUN**

Economic development is Richard Blackwell's business, and in Oconee County, business is booming.

Blackwell, the executive director of the Oconee Economic Alliance, told

his board recently that with 1,302 new jobs announced and roughly \$360 million in capital investments through 29 projects, Oconee's current run is the "best five-year stretch in the history of the county" in terms of economic development.

"That's not just one deal," he said. "Some communities are fortunate, and they can have one big hit and create a big number. But we've been working hard. I like to think of it as 29 singles; it's not just been one big home run."

The county's economic development successes have played a major role in dropping its unemployment rate to 3.5 percent in April — its lowest since December 2000, when the figure stood at 3.2 percent.

April's unemployment figure was significantly down from 4.1 percent in March and down even further from 4.8 percent a year

earlier in April 2016, and Blackwell said the improvement over the last year is worth celebrating.

"(The jobless rate) has dropped by 1.3 percent in the last 12 months, and (that is) the largest drop out of the three counties of Anderson, Oconee and Pickens in that time span," he said.

"Unemployment is at 17-year low, which is great," Blackwell added, "but the challenge remains — increasing the skills of our labor force. The flip side of this is also positive as we have more Oconee citizens employed than ever before."

Since the calendar turned to 2017 alone, Schneider Electric announced 56 new jobs and a \$7.3 million expansion at its Seneca facility, Itron announced 100 new jobs and a \$10 million capital investment in West Union, Jantzen announced a \$4 million expansion and 16 jobs in Seneca, and Clemson EPOCH announced a \$60 million mixed-use/student housing development that will create 30 new jobs.

Blackwell said the Itron and Schneider Electric announcements were particularly significant "wins" for the county because the companies could have located those specific business lines anywhere in the world, yet Oconee came out on top in a competitive process.

"The greatest compliment a company can show is continued expansion in a commu-

nity," he said.

In addition to the announcements that have come in calendar year 2017, Oconee has also seen a \$6.7 million capital investment announced from Sealed Air since the start of fiscal year 2017 — which began on July 1, 2016.

That was part of nearly \$90 million in capital investment in calendar year 2016, including Baxter Enterprises and Hi-Tech Mold & Engineering's \$20.7 million and 87 announced jobs at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park. With its groundbreaking in August, Baxter/Hi-Tech became the county's first BMW supplier and also the first tenant for OITP.

"Given BMW located in Spartanburg in 1992, it is great to see a company land in Oconee providing jobs making products for this global car company," Blackwell said.

With momentum strong in the first half of 2017, Blackwell said it would be crucial for Oconee not to rest on its laurels, but rather to finish the calendar year strong.

"We've already pretty much outpaced 2016, and it's only (midway through the year)," he told his board of directors recently. "I wish I could take the rest of the year off, but we can't. We're having a very good year, and we are human and we are greedy — so we want more and more economic activity. We've had good past successes, and we're focusing on future successes."



FILE PHOTO

Itron announced 100 new jobs as part of a \$10 million expansion at its West Union facility earlier this year.



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Robert Schulte, the president and CEO of Baxter Enterprises and Hi-Tech Mold and Engineering, center, and other officials take part in a groundbreaking ceremony for the companies' new facility at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park in August. Baxter Hi-Tech, which brought an announced capital investment of \$20.7 million and 87 announced jobs to the county, became Oconee's first BMW supplier and also the first tenant at the county-owned Oconee Industry and Technology Park.