

Alliance touts \$153M in Oconee County investments

French company comes to Walhalla

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
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SENECA — Richard Blackwell used his time at Tuesday's Oconee Economic Alliance annual meeting to tout increases in job creation and investment in the county in 2017.

Blackwell, executive director of the alliance, told a gathering of the board of directors and 70 investors the county has seen \$153.2 million in new taxable investment and 365 new jobs since January. That's an increase of approximately 70 percent in both investments and jobs from 2016, according to Blackwell.

Blackwell added the new investments amount to the "highest mark ever" in the county's history.

"I was telling staff (recently) Charleston County was \$92 million year-to-date," he said. "Here we are in Oconee County at \$153 million. Take pride in what's happening with the organization you're supporting."

Blackwell reminded the board and investors the goals of the alliance are diversifying the county's economy, building industrial parks, nurturing strategic partnerships and telling the story of Oconee County to new audiences.

"I'm confident in saying we are on the right path, and the Golden Corner of South Carolina is shining bright," Blackwell said.

Blackwell pointed to the recent arrival of French company Vermon in downtown Walhalla as an example of the progress the county has made. Vermon makes ultrasound probes, and 85 percent of the company's business is the medical marketplace, according to Dana Todd.

Todd, the chief operations officer for Vermon Nondestructive Testing, said Vermon wants to expand its reach into nondestructive testing, an industry for making machine and equipment parts that hold up during testing and ultimately improving the longevity of the parts.

And the company chose Oconee County to begin extending its reach into the nondestructive testing market. Vermon

Nondestructive Testing has five employees and will be building indestructible ultrasound probes and marketing the probes through internet sales out of the Oconee Business Center in Walhalla.

The center is an incubator for new businesses.

"The incubator has meant a lot," Todd said. "It's made some of the more difficult aspects of starting a new facility much easier, especially when it comes to the facility itself."

Dave Eldridge, a business mentor at the center, said the arrival of Vermon in Walhalla "speaks well" for Oconee County. Eldridge is on the board of directors for the Tri-County Entrepreneurial Development Corp., which oversees the center.

"As their business gets established in the U.S., Vermon will add more and more employees ... while manufacturing a product in Walhalla," he said.

Eldridge said about 10 businesses operate out of the incubator. And for Eldridge, the incubator is a part of the larger partnership between the alliance and entrepreneurial development corporation.

"We work very closely with the alliance," Eldridge said, adding Blackwell is on the board of directors for the development corporation. "We fill the gap of assisting small businesses and create jobs. We do this because small businesses have a lot of challenges that the owners might not be prepared to handle."

Blackwell told The Journal after Tuesday's meeting the arrival of Vermon in Oconee County is significant because although the Walhalla location is starting small, he expects Vermon is "going to finish big." Blackwell said the goal is to get Vermon to stay in the county by making the company "comfortable" for the next few years.

Blackwell called the successes and job creation in the county "pretty incredible," but stressed the momentum the county has experienced must continue.

"This is just the beginning for Oconee County," Blackwell said. "As you walk away, remain focused on the long-term gains our community is striving for. And as we come to the line today, know this is not the finish line, but merely the starting line."