



Council members mixed on urgency of preparing for future without nuclear station

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA —
Oconee County Council members are mixed on the urgency of preparing for a future without Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station providing a substantial portion of the county's tax base, including one councilman who said the loss of the plant could mean a thinning of the county's population.

During a meeting last month, Ben Turetzky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, told council members "now is the time" to begin preparing for a potential time down the road without the nuclear station.

"I think we really have to start taking a long view of what's going to happen,

whether we like it or not," Turetzky told the council at its meeting Nov. 7. "I don't think Duke is going to tell you when and if they're going to make a decision about extra time for those reactors, but there's no question that eventually they're going to disappear and you're going to have to operate on that basis."

The Oconee Nuclear Station operated from 1970-2010 on its original 40-year licensing agreement with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and was granted a 20-year renewal by the NRC in 2010 that will expire in 2030.

Three nuclear stations in the United States have applied for a second 20-year renewal.

"There's a lot of skepticism about whether these reactors are going to go for 80 years," Turetzky said. County Treasurer Greg Nowell said Duke

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Wayne McCall
Oconee County Council member

Georgia officials talk about loss of coal plant on lake

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SENECA — Nearly three years ago, the lives of people in Putnam County, Ga., changed when a coal plant owned by Georgia Power on Lake Sinclair closed its doors.

In addition to the loss of jobs from the closure, nearly \$7 million in county, city and school property tax revenue were lost as well.

"We raised taxes 40 percent," Putnam County manager Paul

SEE GEORGIA, PAGE A3



OUR VIEW

TO READ A RELATED
EDITORIAL, TURN
TO PAGE A4.

SEE FUTURE, PAGE A3

pays about \$28 million in county property taxes — about one-third of the total property taxes the county takes in annually.

Councilman Wayne McCall said he is not very concerned about the closing of the nuclear plant and believes if Duke leaves Oconee in the future, the county will also lose the Keowee Dam, which has provided for tourism and lakefront property — and with it, a large chunk of the county's population.

"A dam is a liability," McCall said. "If you ain't generating power, that's a huge liability. They generally get money from the federal government to take the dam out. So Ben (Turetzky) don't have to worry about their little valuable lakefront community, because this would be a sagebrush community. If they discontinue that durn power plant, they're going to take that dam out of there. They don't want that liability and the maintenance of something that ain't making money. If it didn't exist and they took the dam out, I guess a lot of people would be moving out of here.

"We ought to be thankful we're getting it," McCall said of the taxes being paid by Duke Energy. "Duke's a good thing.

It employs a lot of people. We should be thankful."

Councilman Paul Cain said the council should plan "from a worst-case scenario."

"From an economic development standpoint, we always need to be doing the best job that we can; we always have to assume the worst from a tax base standpoint and go from there," Cain said. "We certainly appreciate all that Duke does in our community, but as we've seen with natural gas prices affecting nuclear, there are threats out there that weren't contemplated."

Cain said council needs to continue to emphasize increasing economic development efforts to attract more industry and business into the county.

"We want as many jobs as we can get," he said. "We want as much investment as we can get without destroying what makes Oconee County so attractive to these industries. We can't afford to rest on our laurels, because everybody else is competing in this game and it's very competitive."

Councilman Julian Davis said if the nuclear plant is closed down the road, Duke Energy could still have a strong economic base in Oconee County.

"Duke Power is more than just a nuclear plant," Davis said. "There are

millions of dollars of other investments, such as the hydro project and transmission lines, that will always be needed by Duke's growing customer base. Instead of preparing for a future without the Oconee Nuclear Station, we should involve Duke Power in our future planning. The continued economic development is not only valuable for Oconee County, but for Duke Power as well. We are continuing to strive for new development and expansion of our current industry."

Board chairwoman Edda Cammick said that while she believes the council should start looking seriously to find solutions to a potential Duke exit from the county in the future, she needs to give more thought to what those solutions should be.

"I think we need to start preparing for a future that does not include Duke Power, but we cannot spend all the new revenue coming in," Cammick said. "We would have to save. Council will have to keep its fingers off that money, and taxpayers will have to get comfortable with having money accumulating in the bank with no immediate benefit.

"From all I've read, the life span of a nuclear reactor is finite. Some estimates are in the 40 years range, while some exceed 100. ... (Turetzky's)

concern is valid, although I believe we have time."

Councilman James Glenn Hart said he supports improving economic development, but is not concerned that Duke Energy will leave Oconee.

"I'm all for it, but I'm not going to say the sky is falling ..." Hart said. "I don't see Duke Power leav-

ing here. They may cut back, they may not pay as much taxes, but they may be coming to a natural gas facility at some time."

Hart, who represents southern Oconee on council, said he is hopeful that potential industrial and business development in the future along the three Interstate 85 exits in

the county could "pick up the slack" from revenue losses from Duke Energy down the road.

"That's the reason we have economic development," Hart said. "We're trying to draw other people to come in here."

GEORGIA: Dam still in place after closure

FROM PAGE A1,

Van Haute said. "The plant was one-seventh of our property tax revenue. Since the plant has closed, we went from 5.4 to 7.99 mills when it came off the tax digest. Yes, I was very upset."

Van Haute said the county also lost about \$200,000 a month from sales tax revenue from the sale of coal from the plant.

Across the river in Baldwin County, Sammy Hall, chairman of the Baldwin County Board of Commissioners, said there was some effect in his county as well, especially for residents who worked at the plant and lost their jobs when it closed.

He said Georgia Power did not remove the Sinclair Dam, which kept the lake intact.

"They're not going to take this dam out for a couple of reasons," Hall said. "They still use it for some hydro generation. There are two lakes, and they pump water from one lake to the other lake and then let it come back through and generate electricity through hydro."

"Second of all, it's a 15,000-acre lake and there's probably 15,000 or more homes on that lake," Hall added. "They would have an outcry that would be unbelievable if those people looked out the door and the water was gone, so I don't think that's going to happen. I can't imagine that."

Georgia Power spokesman Craig Bell said the Plant Branch coal-fire facility closed April 15, 2015, after more than 50 years of service. He said Georgia Power still operates the Sinclair Dam hydro facility.

"The retirement of Plant Branch April 15, 2015, was a difficult decision made after careful deliberation and analysis and was ultimately necessary to maintain our commitment to customers to provide the most reliable and affordable electricity," Bell said. "Plant Branch, a coal-fired facility, was a key generating resource providing reliable electricity to the citizens of Georgia for over 50 years."

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