

Oconee officials look to future of economic

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
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SENECA — Attracting more workforce housing and filling out the county's three industrial parks is a top focus for Oconee's top economic development official.

Oconee Economic Alliance president Annie Caggiano has been in the position for a little more than a year and is already familiar with the county's inherent strengths and drawbacks to attracting investors.

"You have to know your weaknesses in order to improve upon them," Caggiano said. "One of our issues here is what people would call workforce housing. That's certainly a problem — new families coming into the area, whether it's for one of our projects or someone coming to the hospital or Duke (Energy) or any of these large employers we have. I think that's an issue that is typically hard to address, because the market will drive that."

She is upbeat about the incoming growth that has spread to other counties from Greenville.

"Being surrounded by Anderson and Pickens (counties), they are the hotspots right now for that kind of housing, but eventually it will come," she said. "It's a challenge for new people and new employers coming to the area right now. I wouldn't call it a weakness, but it's certainly a challenge."

There are inherent pluses everywhere throughout Oconee County, Caggiano said. While Oconee County might seem like an island for some — requiring visitors to go over bodies of water to enter — it's filled with lakes, hiking trails and mountains.

"If you're an outdoor enthusiast, we have hiking and the mountain biking is huge," Caggiano said. "The cost of living is very mod-



development

Above: Oconee Economic Alliance president Annie Caggiano, left, and director of research and existing industry Emily Hodge stand at an open area at the Oconee Industry and Technology Park. Right: Officials are still in search of tenants for the Golden Corner Commerce Park on S.C. Highway 59.

FILE PHOTOS

erate, if not lower, than most of the Southeast. You can have a job here, you can have a great quality of life and you can actually afford it, which is different than our larger markets. If you look at Atlanta or Charlotte (N.C.), we're smack in the middle of it if somebody wants to live in a rural area but have proximity to multicultural cities. We can be at Atlanta in two hours or Charlotte in two hours."

As for industrial parks, Oconee County's have space available.

Oconee County has invested more than \$5 million in acquiring more than 900

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acres of property between three industrial parks since 2005, between the Oconee Industrial and Technology Park (OITP), Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) and Seneca Rail Park. OITP is the most developed of the three, with Horton Holdings' recent expansion, Tri-County Technical College's Oconee campus and the School District of Oconee County's Hamilton Career and Technology Center.

OEA director of research and existing industry Emily Hodge said the specialized workforce is present in the county. Bringing the career center online, along with Tri-County's presence, will only boost its younger demographic of skilled workers.

"We're constantly working on the workforce development side," she said. "We've worked hard with Tri-County Tech and

**Emily
Oconee Economi
of research and**

the school district. Our workforce here is better than most with manufacturing-aligned skills, and our concentrations here are super high for machinists and engineers. It's very high in our area."

The latter two county parks are searching for tenants, although the Seneca Rail Park is still having its infrastructure built out.

"We have three county-owned industrial parks that really have three separate labor sheds and a good variety that if someone comes in and doesn't like OITP and they want to be closer to (Interstate) 85, then they'll like Golden Corner," Caggiano said. "We have a variety of products in our industrial parks, and our county has invested a lot of money in getting these parks ready to go."

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president

SENECA PARKS COMING ALONG

Last year, Oconee County was awarded a \$500,000 S.C. Rural Infrastructure Authority (RIA) grant for water and sewer lines at the Seneca Rail Park. The county has already invested more than \$1.4 million in the purchase and

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Water and sewer work should be completed within 9-12 months.

"We have all our permits in hand and have the grants from the RIA, so it's a key project to make that site ready to go," Caggiano said. "The county has put their money where their mouth is, and they've also tried very hard to go out and make sure they apply for all the grants possible."

A separate Seneca industrial site is also moving along.

After years of improvements, the 475,000-square-foot former Propex building on Shiloh Road is now nearly completely occupied and is expected to bring in more than \$1 million in lease payments this fiscal year.

Now called the Seneca Industrial Complex, the facility is on 50 acres next

improvements at the park, located just outside Seneca city limits. The 111-acre park was purchased in 2012 for \$400,000. In June, Oconee County Council awarded the infrastructure project bid to Cedar Farms and Construction of Georgia.



leasing another \$30,000 square feet for office space and a maintenance area for its all-electric bus system.

City officials say the building is expected to generate \$1,035,488 in lease payments in the next fiscal year, which begins July 1.

The Seneca Facilities

Corporation has made improvements to the property, including adding docks for the tenants, painting the building, repaving the parking lots with concrete and landscaping. Funding for those projects came from the refinancing of the original loan, which provided about \$1 million for improvements.

to the Seneca Rail Site, which is owned by the city, and has a rail spur that allows tenants to load products from docks to trains to take to the Inland Port Greer and from there, to the Port of Charleston.

BorgWarner signed a 10-year lease in 2019, adding another 75,000 square feet to give the company 241,639 square feet in the building. Johnson Controls has about 143,000 square feet of space and six years left on its lease there. Seneca Transit is

THE GOALS AHEAD

Each of the goals for the OEA office comes with a long-view approach — and that includes upgrading infrastructure. Caggiano said the limitations of sewer throughout Oconee County limits economic development.

"We talk about infrastructure being a strength, but it's also one of our weaknesses," she said. "The sewer here is certainly limited, both when you look at commercial development and industrial development, it limits housing development as well. I would say the biggest challenges facing us in the next year or two are going to be sewer and housing."

Advocating for improved infrastructure where needed is up to the OEA, Caggiano said.

"This stuff doesn't happen overnight, and it took some time to get to Golden Corner, but now that we've accomplished that, we can do Sewer South, and Sewer South is going to Exit 1 and 2 of 85. It's definitely a slow process, but there's a lot of people working toward it. ... Sewer is an issue in all rural areas of South Carolina, and that's why we have partners like the Rural Infrastructure Authority. Sewer is difficult to do, and people usually wait until there's a need, but that's a slippery slope."

Working during the coronavirus pandemic has forced the OEA office to focus on the work ahead.

"It's a strange time, but economic development is a long game," Caggiano said. "When we're working with projects, they're looking anywhere nine months out to 24 months out or even five years out. We have maintained our activity level."