

New Bountyland

fire substation on the move

County in process of paying church \$100K for site

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County is in the process of paying a Seneca church \$100,000 to subdivide its property to become the home of the new Bountyland fire substation.

County council chair-

man John Elliott said at Tuesday's council meeting the county was "pleased to announce" the ongoing acquisition, and "groundbreaking will be soon." Elliott said Maranatha Baptist Church leaders agreed for the substation to be located adjacent to the church's property at 240

Keowee School Road. The site the church sits on is approximately 10.18 acres, according to the county assessor's map.

"County officials have worked diligently for more than a year to identify a location for the substation on Keowee School Road," Elliott said.

"Oconee County would

like to extend its gratitude to the church, its board of deacons and to the entire congregation for their willingness to subdivide their property for this important investment into emergency services and continued priority into public safe-

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Oconee County is working to finalize a \$100,000 land purchase from Maranatha Baptist Church on Keowee School Road.

ty. we are currently conducting due diligence in preparation for the \$100,000 purchase."

Councilman Julian Davis, who owns a Seneca-based insurance agency, said better fire protection lowers insurance premiums and helps residents financially.

"For those that are in the insurance world, you pay very high premiums, and this is one of those areas it touches. We've worked really hard on our fire protection rates in Oconee County," he said. "That's not only given them better fire protection, but has lowered their insurance rates."

The announcement signals a formal shift away from a 1.39-acre site on South Cove Road, off Keowee School Road, which the county acquired from the School District of Oconee County for \$10 in 2017.

BROCK ON MOVE

Since 2015, the county has spent more than \$44,000 on

engineering and architectural consulting work on the sub-

station. On Wednesday, county administrator Amanda Brock told The Journal the move was "absolutely not" a waste of tax dollars, because money already spent on designs will apply to the new site.

"The \$44,000 expended was not specific to that site, and the buildings were engineered when we did the design build contract ... for the 10 substations under construction," she said. "The site was cleared

by the county, but it wasn't entirely wooded. We just removed a few trees and got the encroachment done."

Council and fire officials have expressed concern about the traffic and limitations of expansion on South Cove Road. Brock said she expected an emergency traffic signal would "not pass" because of the low traffic count in the area.

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Amanda Brock

Oconee County administrator

"Although a previous location had been identified and the school district was gracious enough to offer that donation of

the land for the purpose of an emergency substation, council since that time did not feel that site was ideal," she said. "It would suit the need, but it was not an ideal site. Council did challenge me to find an alternate location for the substation construction."

Brock said she believed the purchase would be finalized by the end of the year.

BOUNTYLAND HISTORY

The construction of a Bountyland fire substation has been more than 11 years in the making.

As part of a fire improvement plan the county adopted in 2010 under the leadership of former county administrator Scott Moulder, officials called for the construction of eight fire substations in the county. To date, seven of those eight have been built. There are now substations on Shiloh Road, in Foxwood Hills, Holly Springs, The Cliffs, Cheohee Valley and two in Mountain

Rest. The cost to build the seven substations, which were designed to help in remote areas, each averaged about \$207,000. For more than a decade, officials have been unable to come to a decision over the location of a potential station in the Bountyland community.

In 2014 and 2017, the county even discussed canceling municipal fire contracts with cities to pay for the construction of a substation in Bountyland. In 2017, Oconee was spending approximately 36 percent of its \$4 million general fund fire budget on the contracts — \$650,000 to the city of Seneca, \$300,000 to the city of Walhalla, \$285,000 to the city of Westminster and \$200,000 to the town of Salem.

Oconee County Council voted in 2015 to bond the construction of a Bountyland fire substation for \$500,000 as part of a \$900,000 bonding plan it approved that also included two other projects.