SALEM

Massive comms tower approved at hydro station

BY LAUREN PIERCE
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SALEM — The Oconee County Board of Zoning Appeals granted Duke Energy approval to build what will be the county's tallest communications tower at its meeting on Monday night.

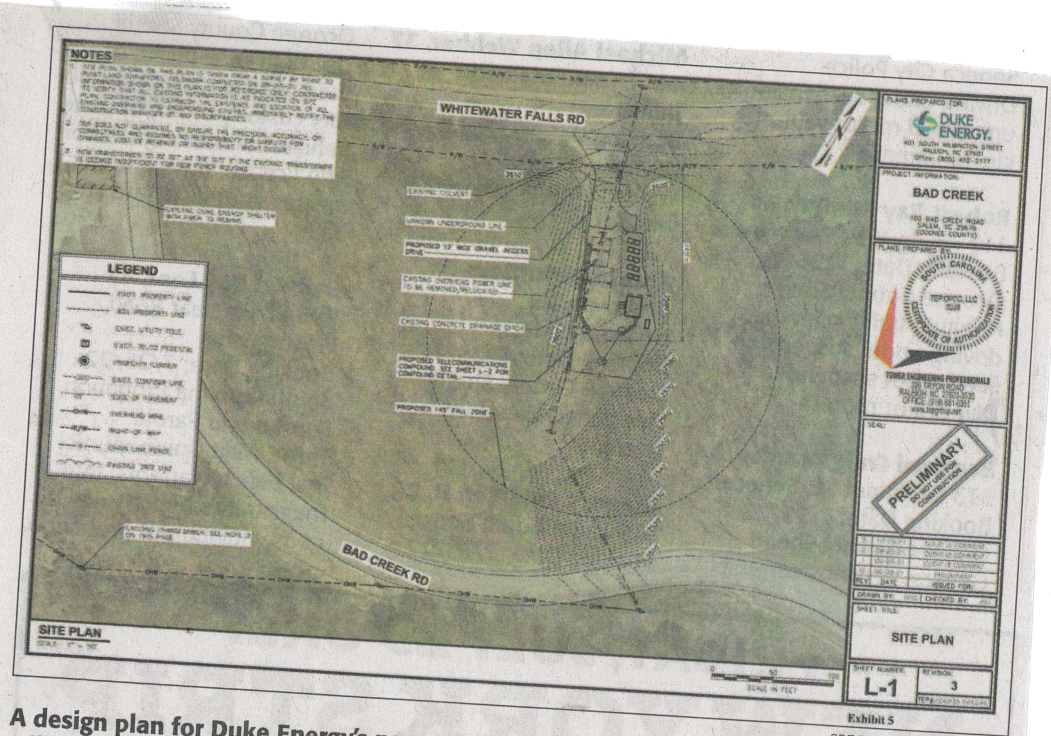
On behalf of Duke Energy, Sarah Spruill of Haynsworth Sinkler Boyd, P.A, requested the special exception along with a 185-foot height variance and a 215-foot fall zone variance from the mandatory 175-foot maximum and 360-foot requirement, respectively.

The communication tower will be installed at 100 Bad Creek Road on the grounds of Bad Creek Hydro Station in Salem.

"Duke Energy is seeking to put in a new communications tower on its 1,000-plus-acre parcel that's the home of the Bad Creek Hydro Station at the far north end of the county," Spruill said.

The project includes

SEE **TOWER**, PAGE **A5**



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

A design plan for Duke Energy's new communications tower shows where the tower will be located off Bad Creek Road and the fall radius of the tower on the grounds of Bad Creek Hydro Station in Salem.

TOWER: A 'significant' upgrade

FROM PAGE A1

removal of the existing communications tower.

"The existing tower has become obsolete for the things that Duke needs to be able to do at that parcel," Spruill said. "As set forth in the application, this is to support Duke's smart grid, communications, operational technologies, land mobile radio systems, AT&T's FirstNet — which connects first responders all over. It is, in general, a significant operational upgrade. Due to the unique qualities of this parcel — which includes a water body, conservation easements, mountainous topographies — the only site that will support all of the things that Duke needs to do is the site that's been requested in this special exception and variance application."

Board chairman Jim Codner said the tower would be "twice as high as any tower we have in the county" and "three times as high as a tree canopy."

"Duke is an unusual property owner with unusual needs, and those needs very much need this tower," Spruill said in response.

ENHANCED CELL SERVICE

Duke Energy project manager and West Union resident Patrick Bernier said the communications tower would have future capacity for additional cellphone carriers and additional Duke use.

Carriers that join the tower would help enhance cell service in the area.

"Hopefully, this one tower in this one location ... right along Bad Creek Road, it's in the right spot to service a lot of different uses, both for Duke and commercially," Bernier said. "We anticipate AT&T not being the only carrier on the tower. ... It's in a great location; it's a great height."

Board member Marty McKee called the nearby area a "dead zone."

"There's no communication until you get about halfway to the Oconee State Park and it clicks back in a little bit. ... I think any time we can get some more communication areas and out of these dark ages, I think it's very important that we do that," McKee said.

'WON'T PULL OUT OF THE GROUND'

In cases of an emergency where the tower breaks — such as high winds — the tower will crumble on itself because "the foundations are deep," according to Bernier.

This will also keep the tower from falling on to the nearby road.

"(The foundations are) all the way into the ground," Bernier said. "I think these are like 80 feet deep or something, but people will think the tower will tip over. ... During a wind event, even a high wind event, the top of the tower will fold over on to the side of the tower. Well, once that does, the wind load that the tower sees is now in half of whatever the fall distance is. The foundations won't pull out of the ground."

Designing towers this way is "a Duke standard," he added.

"We build a lot of these towers ... so we want to know where they're going to break. We want to know where they're going to collapse," Bernier said.

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