

'A ways to go'

Oconee looking to invest in empty commerce park



PHOTOS BY CALEB GILBERT | THE JOURNAL

Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Jamie Gilbert said in August the entity has applied for \$300,000 from the South Carolina Department of Commerce to improve the Golden Corner Commerce Park. The property has sat empty since 2005, when the county bought it for \$1.8 million.

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County's new economic development director is looking to spruce up a long-barren industrial park with state money.

Jamie Gilbert, who started his tenure as Oconee Economic Alliance director in May, said at an August county meeting the site currently drawing the most outside interest from investors is the vacant Golden Corner Commerce Park off S.C. Highway 59, though the site "has some issues."



Gilbert

"Fortunately, we've gotten sewer down there. But as far as the site in terms

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PARK: OEA has asked state for \$300K

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of appearance and readiness, it still has a ways to go," Gilbert said at a county planning and economic development meeting this week.

He then revealed the OEA has requested the maximum amount it can — \$300,000 — for site enhancements from the South Carolina Department of Commerce. Gilbert added the county has also asked for "additional funds to clear, grade and make (the site) pad-ready."

"We believe we'll be able to do the things that are needed at that park in a very short timeframe," he said. "We'll be coming back to council to present that at the September meeting."

Councilman Julian Davis said the current state of the park was a "very difficult site to see where it's at."

The committee then unanimously moved to explore site enhancements, grading options and speculative building concepts.

HOW SOON?

At last week's groundbreaking ceremony for Impact Housing Group in the Oconee Industry and

Technology Park (OITP), Gilbert told The Journal officials were "in the process of working on some things that will prepare that (GCCP) property."

"Once that property is prepared, you will see that same activity that we've seen here in the last two to three years," he said. "I will tell you in the next six to eight months, that site will have significant acreage out there ready to go. ... That property will be gone in a very short time, and we have a plan to do that."

PARK HISTORY

Oconee purchased the 322-acre park in Fair Play for \$1.8 million in 2005. The park is 2 miles off Interstate 85. In January 2020, then-Oconee County Councilman Wayne McCall called the site a "white elephant."

"We've tried to market it and tried to market it," he said at the time. "Nobody wants it. It's got too many turns to get in and out. We ain't getting no tax money off of it. It was a bad investment — we bought it. Both economic development people — current and in the past — have tried everything. No takers."

Around the same time, Project Aztec was rumored to be a proposed solar farm operation at the park, but the deal never came together.

LOCAL ACTIVITY

Gilbert also provided a brief update to the committee, saying there were 13 active projects in the county and 47 leads this year. A lead is when an inquiry is made by the state Department of Commerce or site consultant, Gilbert explained, and once a site visit or more specific conversations transpire, it becomes a project.

"We're excited to see that activity level," he said. "We're optimistic in the next six to 12 months we'll have some news of new companies that have made a commitment to come to Oconee County."

"I think the best days for Oconee County are ahead," Councilman Paul Cain later said to Gilbert.

After executive session at the Aug. 23 county council meeting, the council directed county staff to move forward with easement negotiations about economic development Project Bear.