

# Oconee officials sound off on future growth

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SENECA — When it comes to planning for the future of Oconee County, some officials say the area is behind, considering the substantial growth the county is seeing.

In 2021 alone, a total of 26 subdivision applications were submitted to the county, according to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request fulfilled by the county's planning department.

Planning director James Coley said recently that 15 applications

had already been submitted this year with about four months to go.

County planning commission chairman Frankie Pearson said Oconee will "probably end up with 30 or more (subdivisions) by the end of the year."

"It's gone up every year

— the number of subdivisions and the number of people," he said. "I want people in our county — don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I don't want people to move to Oconee County, because I do, but if we just take the history of what it's doing, it would have to go up

next year. So we get 30 this year, we might be 50 next year. You just don't know.

"This county is real famous for being reactive and not proactive. That's why we get in some of these little mixes with

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the county, because we're not thinking of the future," Pearson added. "We're only thinking about right now, and you can't do that. You've got to be proactive and think about the future and think about the safety of the people in this county. Evidently, we don't have anyone doing that at this point, except maybe the planning commission, and we get fussed at."

## 'KIND OF FLYING BLIND'

Increased traffic on roads near planned subdivisions could become a concern in the future, Oconee County Councilman Paul Cain said.

"You don't have to go far to see what a lack of planning produces, and I fear that the development occurring in some of the more rural areas of our county ... is going to cause a lot of unexpected consequences," said Cain, who serves as chair of council's Planning and Economic Development Committee. "Construction traffic tears up the roads, and many residents coming from a subdivision or

going to a subdivision ... are going to increase traffic on these roads ... which is going to be very frustrating. Once they're there, they're there for good."

Cain added the county needs "better planning" and standards to "objectively analyze a project" to "see what the impact will be long term."

"We're kind of flying blind. ... The growth is coming, and we don't have the tools to manage it. ... The word is out that this is a great place to live, work and play and raise a family," he said. "But we can lose that very easily — like many other places in this country have lost ... if we don't have some standards that developers must adhere to."

Can said whenever standards are brought up to impose on developers, "people cry foul and say we're affecting property rights."

"And I agree, we are, but what value will your property rights be if you have terrible traffic congestion and are sitting in the car for 30 minutes in traffic every day or an hour every day trying to get to the grocery store or to your job or to school?" Cain said. "That can

really hurt the quality of life here, and I see that happening."

## PLANNING DEPARTMENT ON COUNTY'S FUTURE

When asked questions concerning growth in Oconee County, Coley said "our department and the county are unable to predict the future, and work specifically toward the goals and vision of council."

## HANDLING THE SEWER FLOW

While Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority executive director Chris Eleazer said the Conreoss Wastewater Treatment Plant has the capacity for development, he added officials "have areas of concern" within the system "to move wastewater from certain particular points."

"If it's a development that is at or over 10,000 gallons per day — estimated or calculated — we require them to have a downstream capacity assessment performed on our wastewater conveyance system to make sure we would be able to convey the wastewater from the potential development, subdivision or whatever it may be to the treatment plant on our

lines," he said. "That's one thing that we do in advance to ensure that we can handle the flow."

Eleazer said the authority uses hydraulic modeling, which can show the effects of changing conditions of a system and display information about pipes, pumps, valves, flow, pressure, water quality and more.

"We've had (an assessment) done on systems that were a few thousand gallons, just to make sure that we would be able to move that wastewater during drought weather and wet weather events," he said. "Maybe February, March, April, there was a subdivision that was proposed — I think it was off S.C. Highway 11 somewhere — that would have been served by the city of Westminster. And at that time, the downstream model said that we had the capacity for wet weather to move it but that if we accepted it during dry weather, it would cause an additional overflow on our system, according to the model."

## SEWER BETWEEN SENECA AND CLEMSON

The sewer authority is in the

process of creating a design to replace the Seneca Creek Pump Station and force main that should allow additional flow in the area.

"Until we have the entire project constructed ... we will gain limited capacity in that area," Eleazer said. "But we're hoping to be able to gain enough capacity to serve the two or three projects that those developers have proposed doing in that general vicinity. ... We have budgeted to design that pump station to accommodate growth to serve that area. ... I don't think I've seen that many proposed come through here, meaning that a lot of them may be in areas where sewer's not available.

"The constraint that we have right now is not necessarily the treatment plant; we've got capacity to treat the wastewater," he added. "The issue that we have is making sure that we can get the wastewater from the point where it is introduced to our system to the treatment plant. That's what we got to make sure that we can accommodate."

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