

A Public "Town Hall" Meeting was held by the Oconee County Board of Commissioners on Thursday, June 10, 2010, at 7:00 p.m. at the Oconee County Civic Center.

Members Present: Vice-Chairman John Daniell  
Commissioner Jim Luke  
Commissioner Margaret Hale  
Commissioner Chuck Horton

Staff Present: Administrative Officer Alan Theriault  
County Clerk Gina M. Lindsey  
County Attorney Daniel Haygood  
Finance Director Jeff Benko  
Economic Development Director Rusty Haygood

Media Present: Blake Giles, The Oconee Enterprise  
Anna Dolianitis, The Oconee Leader

Vice-Chairman Daniell called the meeting to order and welcomed the public. He explained Chairman Davis was on vacation with his family and passed on his regrets for not being able to attend. Commissioner Daniell stated the purpose of the public meeting was to discuss economic development in Oconee County.

Administrative Officer Alan Theriault served as moderator of the meeting and explained the procedures for making statements and asking questions of the Board of Commissioners.

Tammy Gilland spoke on a previous recommendation by the Oconee Athens-Clarke Regional Economic Development Task Force to merge economic development efforts in Oconee County with Athens-Clarke County. Commissioner Daniell said the money Oconee County is currently spending on economic development is not effective. Commissioner Luke said the proposal was not set up as an equal partnership and Athens-Clarke County has recognized Oconee County will not join them in the proposed development efforts. Commissioner Horton stated he is not in favor of any joint endeavor unless it has a positive impact on the citizens of Oconee County. Commissioner Hale recalled the proposal required Oconee County to give up its local economic development office. She recognized the importance of the county's economic development office working with local businesses.

Flynn Warren asked if the county has a system or policy for offering tax abatements to businesses looking to come into Oconee County. Commissioner Hale stated she would not consider offering tax abatements unless there would be a positive result to the citizens in a short time period. Commissioner Horton said there is a limit to what can be given. He noted the county could give up more than the school system. Commissioner Luke remarked there is no "magic formula" and good judgment would need to be used. Commissioner Daniell said each business would be looked at on an individual basis.

Monica Ali spoke on the lack of land zoned for business or industrial. Commissioner Daniell stated this is a deterrent for Oconee County and something that needs serious consideration. Commissioner Luke said he supported appropriate zoning of properties. Commissioner Horton agreed, and said the county has probably lost some businesses because they do not want to fight a zoning battle. Commissioner Hale noted the adoption of the Unified Development Code was the first step in the process. She stated the Board of Commissioners needs to know what the citizens want in the county.

Chuck Williams said the Development Authority is concerned over the lack of locations for "blue collar" companies. Commissioner Luke stated he is in favor of identifying and zoning properties for lower-end industrial and asked for recommendations from the Development Authority and other groups. He noted the county may need additional zoning classifications. Commissioner Horton explained the location issue becomes a problem when there are adjoining residential areas. Commissioner Hale said she supports working with the Chamber of Commerce and the Development Authority.

Chuck Williams asked if property could be rezoned but taxed at the current use. The Commissioners said this would be a question for the County Attorney.

Matt Elder asked what areas of the county would be appropriate for “blue collar” industrial companies. Commissioner Luke said the areas backing toward the 316 Corridor and along Hwy. 78 toward the outskirts of the county would be good for industrial zoning. Commissioner Horton questioned if there are any available properties adjacent to existing industrial uses. Commissioner Hale said the Board would have to look where infrastructure was in place.

Sarah Bell asked the Commissioners to define Economic Development. Commissioner Daniell replied the county needs more jobs and tax diversification. Commissioner Luke said the county needs jobs that pay well and development that brings good opportunities to Oconee County. Commissioner Horton stated the county cannot rely on retail businesses alone and noted it is important to have a good balance. Commissioner Hale said businesses are needed that will enhance our community, become involved and support the community. She noted agricultural businesses and small businesses are also important.

Larry Ward spoke on the need for industrial zoned areas and economic growth that will not place a burden on taxpayers. Commissioner Hale recalled the efforts the Board has made over the years to hold down taxes. Commissioner Horton noted the Board has reduced millage rates and reduced the government’s budget. Commissioners Daniell said a diversified tax base is a benefit to the community.

Andrew Malcom asked if the sale of beer and wine has helped economic development. Commissioner Daniell explained with the economic downturn, it would be hard to determine. Commissioner Luke said alcohol license applications have come in slowly, but the county has retained good, stable restaurants. Commissioner Horton noted some restaurants have opened and some have closed. Commissioner Hale said she has not seen the detrimental effects that were originally projected.

Franklin Shumake said that in his observation, most voters are not interested in economic growth. He likes the county as it is now and asked the Board to be careful in their decisions regarding growth.

Chuck Williams asked if there was a plan in place to keep the “big box” stores in their current buildings/locations. Commissioner Horton said the commercial corridor along Epps Bridge Parkway is in its infancy and the businesses are there because they attract shoppers from 5-6 counties. Commissioner Hale noted the Economic Development Staff does a good job in personally keeping in touch with local businesses. She contended this was another reason not to go to with a regional economic development approach. Commissioner Luke said if we continue to provide customers, the “big box” stores will not leave. Commissioner Daniell stated he was in favor of regional economic development. He said the Board will continue to look at the efficiency of the local government.

John Caudill asked what the county will do to entice high tech businesses to locate in Oconee County. Commissioner Daniell said the first step is to have zoning in place. Commissioner Luke noted the county has a lot to offer, as well as the 316 Corridor. Commissioner Horton explained the state government is not participating and it is hard to get companies to locate anywhere in the state. Commissioner Hale agreed a collaboration of state and local governments is necessary.

Kenneth Mann asked if Gateway Business Park is the right area to put money into for marketing. Commissioner Hale stated Gateway Business Park is an asset to the county and expressed the importance of having infrastructure in place. Commissioner Horton said it is all the county has at this time. Commissioner Luke suggested if infrastructure was in place it would benefit the surrounding properties for development as well. Commissioner Daniell said the Board needs a clear picture of what they want to locate there.

Flynn Warren asked how the county stands on workforce readiness. Economic Development Director Rusty Haygood spoke on the Certified Work Ready Community Program and said the county is making progress in identifying its workforce readiness.

Chuck Williams said the Land Use Plan directs development to the north end of the county and expressed concerns with the fairness of land values. Commissioner Daniell said he had no desire to change the Land Use Plan. Commissioner Luke recalled the majority of the citizens have said that is what they wanted. Commissioner Horton agreed the majority of the citizens responded positively to the plan. Commissioner Hale said she has been assured this is the desire of the citizens in the south end of the county. Commissioner Luke remarked he was in favor of the transfer of development rights if there was a way to do it without requiring taxpayer dollars.

Russ Page stated the TDR Committee studied programs around the U.S. and recommended the Board move forward with a TDR Program. Commissioner Daniell said he was not opposed to the transfer of development rights, but there is no funding at this time to bring in a consultant.

Tom Little asked how the county was going to market itself and what grade the Board would give on how it's marketing now. Commissioner Daniell answered once the Board has a vision and direction, it can determine its marketing plans. Commissioner Luke said there are different subjects to be graded on, but those that know Oconee County perceive it well. Commissioner Horton pointed out the amenities of the county and suggested looking at the University of Georgia as a "gift". He reiterated the state needs to work with the local governments. Commissioner Hale noted the Board has made great strides in marketing the county. She said the Board is looking to find out how citizens want the county to be marketed.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

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County Clerk

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Vice-Chairman

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Date