



*Advocates for  
Quality Development*

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*Advocating for  
sound land planning  
that protects  
what we treasure  
as we prepare  
for the future.*

*AQD's unpaid  
volunteers attend  
scores of meetings &  
forums to represent  
property owner views  
on key land &  
lake use issues.*

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# Tell Us Your 'Primary' Interests For Candidate Questionnaires

On June 14, 2022, Oconee County voters will decide which candidates they want to represent the Republican and Democratic parties on the ballot in the November general election.

Turnout for primaries is typically much lower than for general elections. Yet, historically, the primary winners for Oconee County Council seats often become your defacto Council representatives since their districts may not be competitive or there may be no opposition on the November ballot.

That's why it's critical to understand what positions primary candidates take on key issues.

### **Land Planning, Protection Issues**

That's also why Advocates for Quality Development (AQD) will once again send questionnaires to all those who announce they are candidates for County Council

Districts I and III—the two seats up for election in 2022.

AQD is preparing a set of questions focused on local concerns that can impact

county residents' quality of life, safety and property values. The questions will include specifics, such as views on the value of Lake Overlay protections for Lake Keowee and Lake Jocassee, to more general questions about their view of the role of the Oconee County Planning Department and Planning Commission.

### **Send Us Your Questions**

If you have land-planning or environmental concerns you'd like candidates to address, please send them to [AQDUUpstate@gmail.com](mailto:AQDUUpstate@gmail.com). We will focus

exclusively on local issues where Council member votes can impact our members.

We will distribute the answers provided by Council candidates to our individual, family, corporate, and HOA members via our website, email, and print summaries.

### **Non Responses**

Candidates will be given two weeks to answer the questionnaires.

If an individual elects not to take part and provide answers, his or her lack of response will be reported when we send the questionnaire summaries.



*Before you vote, learn Council candidates' positions on land planning & lake protection issues.*

## AQD Debuts New Website

The AQD website name and URL haven't changed. You can still find us at [www.aqdupstate.com](http://www.aqdupstate.com). But, Gerry Yantis, our webmaster, has given it a complete makeover. There's more up-to-date information, and a new menu makes navigation easier. Menu choices include:

- ◆ Home—Provides an overview of AQD's mission, goals, and work.
- ◆ Accomplishments—Summarizes some of our key accomplishments since our founding in 2006.
- ◆ AQD Blog—The AQD Blog is brand new. In addition to posting pieces on topics of interest written by AQD members, we are posting articles and notices from nonprofit partners, such as FOLKS, MLCA and Upstate Forever, who have

common concerns and interests. Relevant Duke Energy news will be shared, too.

- ◆ What We Do—Describes our monitoring, education, awareness & advocacy efforts.
- ◆ Smart Growth—Explains the many benefits of planned growth.

◆ Membership—Offers ability for individuals, HOAs & businesses to join AQD and pay annual dues online.

◆ More—Has many offerings ranging from AQD Bylaws to upcoming events.



*A recent AQD Blog details how the Oconee County Lake Overlay protects our*

# Speakers Point To Oconee County Progress

Amanda F. Brock, Oconee County Administrator, was the first of three guest speakers to take the podium at Advocates for Quality Development's December 11, 2021 annual meeting.

Brock shared many positives with AQD's in-person and Zoom audience. Here are a few examples she cited to illustrate Oconee County progress.

## Public Safety, Fire Substation

Construction will start soon on a Bountyland Fire Substation near the Hwy. 188-South Cove Rd. intersection. Law enforcement and emergency personnel staffs have been increased.

## Parks, Recreation & Tourism

A new road and parking has improved Brasstown Falls access. The result: 700,000 visitors.

A grant added 350 acres to Chau Ram Park. Such assets attract tourists, improve resident quality of life and bring in tax revenue.

## Infrastructure

The county is collaborating with the state, City of Clemson & neighboring counties to plan future road projects to improve traffic safety.

A \$4 million capital investment in equipment and vehicles along with a replacement plan is giving county employees crucial productivity tools.

A \$5.5 million grant for county airport expansion will make this facility an even more important lure for industry.

The airport is credited with a \$10 million annual boost to the economy.

## Grants, Diverse Revenues

The county has secured more than \$10 million dollars in grants. Capital expenditures included Rock Quarry equipment that helped the facility bring in record revenues. Its 2022 sales will top \$10 million.

## Excellent Cyber Security

While a \$22 million ransomware threat meant computers were shut down for a day, relying on in-house software eliminated the risk of losing vehicle, property records & other data.

The four-person IT squad recently improved contracted compliance software that boosted county ATAX revenues 165%. The state is utilizing the software as well.

## Ongoing Challenges

Brock cited sewage treatment ([see Page 4 article](#)) and clear public communication as key challenges.

She recently attended a public meeting in Walhalla where residents objected to a greenway initiative because they thought it required taking people's property. A false fear.

"We must do a better job of sharing details about how projects would happen. If not, people make wrong assumptions. We have to work harder to make sure citizens see us as a resource and not the enemy."

## New Planning Director

In introducing James Coley, the county's Planning Director, Brock said he was hand-picked for his strong stormwater management background.

Coley said he's excited to have a chance to build a stormwater master plan from the ground up.

Among other priorities, he listed working across county-municipal lines to obtain grants for greenway trails that connect communities and resources.

## Councilman John Elliott

While District I Councilman John Elliott expressed pride in the county's ability to serve residents throughout the pandemic, he noted it illustrated a crucial need for countywide internet.

Working with Blue Ridge Electric, the county's striving to expand access so in the future all school children will have internet availability.

He covered other initiatives, too.

- ◆ Extending Salem's water lines.

- ◆ The Sewer South project.

- ◆ Planning Commission work on a junkyard ordinance & development standards. ([See Page 3](#))

- ◆ Using grants to fund scholarships at technical colleges & increase the county's skilled labor pool for industry.

Elliott also made a personal commitment to continue to protect the Lake Overlay District, a key land management safeguard for our lakes.

## HEP 2021 Grants Total Over \$1/2 Million

Habitat Enhancement Project (HEP) grants totaling \$556,927 were awarded in 2021 by the proposal review committee. Some \$450,000 of the total went to Natureland Trust—\$300,000 to help acquire a 190-acre tract on Scenic Hwy 11 and \$150,000 to help acquire 74-acres adjacent to the Jim Timmerman Natural Resources Area at Jocassee Gorges.

Following Duke Energy's 2017 lump sum contribution of \$1 million to the HEP program, continued funding relies on Duke's collection of \$500 lake use permit fees—a funding source expected to yield \$75,000 to \$100,000 annually. While the committee expressed some concern about



Eastern Bluebird  
Photo by Imitiaz Haque

the size of the larger than normal \$300,000 Natureland Trust grant, it felt the amount was justified since its contribution was more than matched by others to reach the \$1 million-plus

purchase price and protect the tract from anticipated development.

Sue Williams represents Advocates for Quality Development on the HEP review committee.

## Other 2021 HEP Grants

- ◆ FOLKS—Awarded \$75,427 for two fish attractor projects—one for County Parks, one for private docks.

- ◆ Nature Conservancy of South Carolina—Awarded \$15,000 for forest restoration in the Lake Keowee Watershed. It will support wildlife habitat management with controlled burns.

- ◆ South Carolina Wildlife Federation—Awarded \$16,500 to restore bird nesting habitat by installing Screech Owl and Wood Duck nesting boxes.

# Frustrating 2021 for Oconee County Planning

Mike Smith, the Oconee County Planning Commission's 2021 chair, labeled the past year as one of frustration, leaving many planning initiatives and action items unfinished.

A resignation left the Planning Department without a director for over half the year. This led to cancelled Planning Commission (PC) meetings while challenging the staff to meet normal public service demands.

The Comprehensive Plan has 71 strategies that required review in 2021. This resulted in limited PC meeting time to address other agenda items. Infrequent meetings of County Council's Planning and Economic Development (PED) committee plus a draft ordinance's return to the PC for a public hearing also impacted the planning group's ability to deal with other county needs.

Here's Smith's summary of key planning items that still require action.

## **Curb Cut Highway Standards**

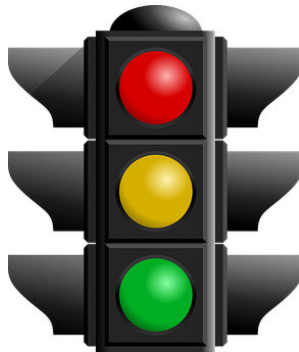
After the PED committee reviewed a report on county traffic collisions, it asked the PC and Planning Department to coordinate and develop added standards for SC Hwy. 123 curb cuts and auxiliary turn lanes. While this busy highway is a state road, the SC Department of Transportation has indicated it would honor County restrictions, if the County develops an ordinance addressing these issues. Corridor development on Hwy 123 makes this traffic safety effort a priority.

## **Development Standards:**

### **Lighting, Screening, Buffering**

This draft ordinance applies **only to new** non-residential, multifamily and mixed-use developments to be built next to existing residential, multifamily, agricultural or forestry uses.

It would require the developer to meet certain lighting, buffering and screening standards. However, these requirements may be waived or modified if adjacent properties record a written agreement with the county. The PC passed and the PED approved this draft ordinance in late 2020. In 2021, Council returned the ordinance to the PC for a public hearing, which resulted in it being revised and returned to Council for its consideration and another public hearing in 2022.



## **Tiny Home Guidance**

The PC staff helped the Building Codes Department develop guidance to address Certificate of Occupancy requests for structures that do not meet existing county-accepted residency construction standards for permanent homes.

These include tiny homes, recreational vehicles, converted shipping containers and utility sheds that some owners have asked the county to accept as permanent residences.

## **RV Park & Junkyards**

Emergency vehicles currently have problems providing assistance to some residents of Recreational Vehicle Parks because built-ons attached to the RVs stymie vehicle approach and make it difficult for medical personnel

to get to the front door.

One proposed solution is to require RVs to move every six months, but passage will face stiff opposition.

Standards for Junkyards are being delayed until the newly-hired Planning Director can come up to speed. The open question will be if this ordinance will address non-business properties that have numerous non-registered vehicles parked on them.

## **Impact Fee Resolution**

A County Council resolution regarding potential implementation of impact fees has expired and will need to be reissued. This would allow fees to be imposed on new student housing developments to help pay for needed infrastructure improvements.

## **Lessening the Silo Effect**

As part of the PC chair's outreach to other committees, an effort has been made to work across committees to address mutual concerns.

The Planning Commission recently coordinated with the Agriculture Advisory Committee to address its concerns about protecting agricultural land.

## **AQD Board**

At AQD's 2021 annual meeting, Sue Williams was reelected to the Board, and Gerry Yantis was voted in to serve his first three-year term.

AQD directors live in seven different Oconee and Pickens County communities. Here are AQD's Board members for 2022.

Jim Codner, South Oak Pointe  
John Eagar, Indian Oaks  
Sharon Hamilton, Port Santorini  
Gary Owens, Wynward Pointe  
Robert Royer, Beacon Shores  
Sue Williams, Highlands (Pickens)  
Gerry Yantis, Waterford

## **Want To Help Tackle Issues?**

The AQD Board would love your help with researching issues, member communications, position statements, stakeholder commitments and other projects. To find out more about how you can help, email us:

**[aqdupstate@gmail.com](mailto:aqdupstate@gmail.com)**

## **Two Ways To 'Attend' County Meetings**

Meetings of the Oconee County Council, the Planning Commission, and other commissions and boards are now live-streamed. To view the meetings live (or later), access the 'Oconee County Live on YouTube' link on the County website ([www.oconeesc.com](http://www.oconeesc.com)) home page.

You can also attend in person at 415 South Pine Street, Walhalla.

Attending live or virtually offers a chance to see how representatives conduct themselves as they tackle local issues. Meeting minutes and news articles can't always capture group dynamics and interaction.

# Aging Sewer Plant & Demand Create Dollar, Rate Crunch

Opened in 1980, Oconee County's sewer plant is now 41 years old and showing its age, making equipment repair and replacement inevitable. Plant capacity was last expanded in 1996.

The capacity of the plant, feeder lines and pump stations all factor into the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority (OJRSA) ability to meet growing demand.

## ~\$50 Million Upgrade

As a result, the OJRSA has put together a three-phase plan that will require up to \$50 million in funding over the next 7 to 10 years to begin the renovation.

For funding, the OJRSA plans to rely on debt and grant financing. At present, the authority is not in a position to go to the debt market. Initially, it will need to raise cash internally through rate increases to achieve a financial footing that will allow it to obtain bond financing.

## 20 Percent Rate Increase

To start this process, the OJRSA voted to increase rates charged to the cities by 20 percent. This will impact bills paid in March. Cities are likely to pass this increase to sewer customers.

There is an effort underway to claw back plant capacity assigned to existing customers but not being used. This unused-but-allocated component



is a significant factor in pushing allocated plant capacity close to the point where a plant expansion would be required.

## Representation Arguments

The authority is facing a disagreement over what is fair voting representation for the cities represented on the Commission. The City of

Seneca contends the originating documents specify Commissioners must be allocated in direct proportion to the way each city pays charges. Using this method Seneca is underrepresented. Since

the other cities served by the Commission have not agreed, the matter will likely be settled in court.

## Ongoing & Future Projects

The Sewer South project to provide sewer for southern Oconee County all the way to the SC Welcome Center on I-85 now has obtained all necessary easements. Construction will likely get underway in May of this year.

After the developer of a future Hwy. 123 multihousing project approached OJRSA about sharing the cost for increased capacity to service the project, the OJRSA gave the required improvements a higher priority.

Bob Royer, AQD director, regularly attends & reports on OJRSA meetings.

# Preventing Septic Failures

The Lake Keowee Source Water Protection Team (LKSAPT) is spearheading a critical effort to address failing septic systems in the Lake Keowee Watershed, which includes most of Oconee County and portions of Pickens County.

Failing systems release bacteria to ground and surface waters, which can put recreators at risk of skin infections, eye irritation, and more.

During 2021, LKSAPT worked with media, government agencies, and utility providers to alert watershed property owners that funds are available to offset septic system repair and/or replacement costs.

To learn about eligibility, visit [www.lakekeoweewatershed.org](http://www.lakekeoweewatershed.org).

Funds are limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Failing septic systems have been identified as a water quality issue in area creeks and rivers.

Duke Energy provided initial funding to form the LKSAPT Team. Advocates for Quality members active in supporting LKSAPT efforts include Rob Aulelach, Sharon Hamilton, and John Eagar.

The team's goal in all its efforts is the long-term protection of Lake Keowee as an invaluable source for recreation and drinking water.

## AQD Membership Mail Form & Online Options

Join or renew your AQD membership! Use this form OR visit [www.aqdupstate.com](http://www.aqdupstate.com) to join and pay online. Family Members should list everyone in household. Memberships may be canceled at any time. However, contributions are nonrefundable. Though Advocates for Quality Development, Inc., is a nonprofit corporation, contributions are NOT tax-deductible.

**Make checks payable to AQD. Return form to AQD, P.O. Box 802, Seneca, S.C. 29679**

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

MEMBERSHIP TYPE:

NEIGHBORHOOD \_\_\_\_\_

INDIVIDUAL \$30     FAMILY \$50  
 DONOR \$100     HOA/BUSINESS \$100

COMMENTS: \_\_\_\_\_

**ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME!**

\_\_\_\_\_