



**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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Oconee County Sewer Plans Impact Development, Your Taxes

In late 2023, Oconee County Council secured a \$25 million general obligation bond that taxpayers will be paying off for the next 20 years. The total cost will be more than \$42 million in today's dollars.

What Will the Bond Finance?

In early 2024, concerns arose regarding the bond's legality and potential conflict with the state constitution. Regardless of the legal outcome, questions persist about future plans for sewer service in southern Oconee County.

For 20 years, the County has wanted to offer sewer to its I-85 Exits to lure new industry. Yet, it remains unclear if the entire \$25 million is needed to service this narrow industrial corridor. Rumors of plans to "spider" sewer out from the I-85 strip concerned many members of the audience at a January special meeting of Oconee County Council.

At the meeting, a number of citizens applauded the use of tax dollars to encourage new industry at the I-85 exits, hoping it would expand job opportunities.

Yet, at least as many citizens voiced strong opposition to expanding sewer in

southern Oconee County beyond the I-85 corridor. Their argument? Tax dollars should not subsidize private developments, especially ones that threaten our shrinking farmland.

(See Preserving Oconee Farmland, pg 3.)

Other Pressing Needs

Councilman John Elliott also noted the County has other pressing needs that should be tackled before tax dollars are spent to spider sewer into areas with no current need. For starters, he cites the US Department of Homeland Security's determination that the County must

provide more secure election facilities. If bond funds aren't available, dollars will have to be found in the County budget for this project.

The Oconee County Joint Regional Sewer Authority also is under a DHEC Consent Decree that requires it to correct problems with aging infrastructure.

AQD research finds many SC counties require new residential developments to pay for all new or enhanced infrastructure, including sewer, water and roads.



AQD Stakeholder Commitments

What is a Duke Energy Stakeholder, and why does AQD invest volunteer time in being one?

We do it to give **YOU** a voice. AQD is one of 17 nongovernmental organization (NGO) stakeholders who, over the past decade, have attended hundreds of meetings, reviewed thousands of pages of documentation, and submitted detailed proposals for change and improvement.

The benefit? Along with fellow NGOs, we keep Duke Energy aware of your concerns on topics ranging from boat congestion to environmental protection. Duke's agreement to prohibit new commercial marinas on Lake Keowee's narrow fingers was the result of one of AQD's recommendations.

Our ongoing stakeholder status lets us review proposals for changes to Duke's

public access areas. The suggestions AQD recently made on South Cove Park renovations are now under consideration.

AQD's other stakeholder commitments involve us in the following projects:

◆ **Duke Energy's Bad Creek Relicensing effort.** Under study is the possible doubling of Bad Creek's generation and energy storage capacity.

◆ **The Lake Keowee Source Water Protection Team.** Its work includes providing financial assistance to homeowners with failing septic systems.

◆ **Keowee-Toxaway Habitat Enhancement Program.** In 2023, it granted \$304,232 to help stabilize the High Falls County Park shoreline, restore Eastatoo Creek stream & angler access, and secure a conservation easement along Highway 11.

Understanding County Approval Process

Key To Having Voice on New Developments

If you're not a developer, why do you care how Oconee County approves major land developments for mixed residential and business use?

The answer—understanding the approval process gives you a chance to preview what's on developer drawing boards and it offers limited opportunities for all of us to suggest changes and voice approval or opposition.

This is important as Oconee County expects more development activity including proposals for projects that could span hundreds of acres and create 1,000-2,000 home communities.

Such massive projects can have major impacts on infrastructure and public services, from roads, water and sewer to schools and law enforcement.

The Oconee County Planning Department may first learn of a potential project when it receives a Sketch Plan. Planning staff then offers



feedback to help the developer create a Preliminary Plan that conforms to County expectations/requirements.

Current County Requirements

A detailed description of the approval process appears on our website <https://www.aqdupstate.com>. But here's an executive summary.

If the property is zoned Control Free, the County only has jurisdiction over a project's adherence to development standards. For instance, it would review new roads to ensure they're

properly sized for County maintenance. It would also examine setbacks, right-of-ways, and any element that would require a Lake Overlay exemption.

On matters such as state road curb cuts or stormwater management to protect bodies of water, the County consults other entities to verify permits and requirements.

Approvals by Others

The SC Department of Health and Environmental Control must approve plans for stormwater, potable water and wastewater systems.

The SC Department of Transportation will require traffic studies before it decides how many curb cuts are allowed on a state road. It may also require the developer to finance improvements, such as passing lanes, to compensate for increased congestion.

The US Army Corp of Engineers will be involved if the project borders a body of water it controls.

For the project's sanitary sewer and potable water systems, the Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority along with any local municipality involved must approve the plans and decide who will pay for new pipelines and/or increased plant capacity.

Bonding Protections

Before Oconee County approves a project's Final Plan and gives an okay to start selling parcels, it verifies that all of its requirements have been met as well as those of other entities.

This gives Oconee County a final chance to protect taxpayers from being burdened with costs to complete unfinished infrastructure. So, if the approved sanitary sewer or water systems are incomplete, the County can require the developer to provide a surety bond to cover 125 percent of the estimated completion cost.

Attend Meetings, Ask Questions



What's Missing? Updated Standards

Oconee County's Development Standards for major land development do NOT include meaningful requirements in many areas other SC counties believe need to be regulated for safety, environmental & quality-of-life reasons.

For instance, the developer of a 500-acre Oconee parcel could clear-cut the entire property for a residential project and not save a single tree as long as it satisfied DHEC wastewater retention and runoff criteria.

Similarly, a developer wouldn't need to reserve any portion of the acreage for greenspace. Nor would there be any restrictions on outdoor lighting or signage.

AQD believes Oconee County needs to review and update development standards to address such deficiencies. Here are a few examples.

◆ **IMPACT STUDIES**—In addition to traffic studies, a major development should be required to forecast how the project may increase the need for fire protection, law enforcement, schools, sewer and other public infrastructure needs that may burden existing taxpayers.

◆ **TREES & GREENSPACE**—Based on size, standards should specify required quantities of trees as well as public greenspace set asides.

◆ **BUFFERS**—If a project abuts major roads, waterways or residential communities, riparian and visual screening buffers are needed.

◆ **LIGHTING & SIGNAGE**—Standards should limit signage size and require lighting to point downward to avoid floodlights from creating a nighttime nuisance for neighboring properties.

◆ **UPFRONT FEES**—At present, the County does not collect application fees until after it has spent considerable time consulting with developers. That can waste staff time and taxpayer dollars on projects that never come to fruition. An upfront application fee would discourage frivolous inquiries.

Why Preserving Oconee Farmland Should Be A Priority No Matter Your County Address

In 2006, Advocates for Quality Development was formed when homeowners in Lake Keowee communities learned developers could exploit Oconee County's lack of land management regulations to build high-density, high-rises along our shorelines.

In the 18 years since, AQD has realized we need better land management to preserve quality of life for all county residents—especially farmers.

That's why we invited Gwen McPhail to be a featured speaker at our fall annual meeting.

McPhail, a former Board Member of the Foothills Agricultural Resource and Marketing (FARM) Center, offered multiple reasons for prioritizing the preservation of agricultural land.

Food Security, Eco-Friendly

- ◆ Agriculture is Oconee County's leading industry.
- ◆ Agriculture's tax contributions exceed the cost of services it receives.
- ◆ Farmland provides wildlife habitat, helps recharge groundwater, and contributes to water quality.
- ◆ One percent of US population feeds the remaining 99 percent. So every farm lost reduces our food security in times of crisis.

Multiple Farmland Threats

Farmland is under tremendous pressure. According to an American Farmland Trust study, more than 280,000 acres of South Carolina agricultural land was "developed or compromised" between 2006 and 2016.

In Oconee County, agricultural acreage declined about 20 percent from 2002 to 2017.

Why? According to McPhail, two of the most important factors relate to development and the price of land.

- ◆ Developers covet farmland, which tends to be relatively flat, and may already be cleared for row crops or grazing—offering a ready, blank



**Gwen
McPhail**

canvas for housing projects. That's why developers are willing

and able to pay far more for farmland than individuals who want to farm it.

Farmers in southern Oconee County fear expansion of sewer coverage beyond I-85 exits could greatly increase development pressure.

- ◆ If farmers have no heirs wishing to farm, they may need to sell to the highest bidder to fund retirement.
- ◆ Once developments encroach on agricultural areas, the competing uses cause friction related to road use and complaints about odors and routine ag practices. This is especially true if developments directly abut farmland and have no buffer restrictions.

Creative Solutions Needed

McPhail discussed a number of strategies to help protect agriculture.

A conservation easement is one of the best known. With conservation easements, owners forfeit potential profits from selling land to developers. To compensate, they're awarded the difference between the land's value as farmland and its value if developed. The farmer retains property ownership, but the land can never be developed.

While conservation easements can help farmers wanting to ensure their property remains undeveloped and available for future farmers, McPhail noted there are disadvantages. A major

one is farmer demand for conservation easements exceeds available SC Conservation Bank funding.

The speaker suggested Oconee County should look at innovative approaches other states use to protect farms.

These include agricultural overlays or enterprise areas, voluntary agricultural districts, and set asides that require any taking of farmland by eminent domain to be matched with a purchase of equal acreage of replacement farmland.

McPhail said such creative options need to be tailored to make them relevant to Oconee County.

AQD Needs More Hands On Deck

AQD's Board meets monthly with members of a leadership team to tackle essential work by dividing up tasks. The Board can't do it all.

Since tasks are varied, volunteers can pick ones matching their interests and talents. Options include:

- ◆ Research land management issues
- ◆ New membership drives
- ◆ Website, blogs, communications
- ◆ Serve as a Duke Energy stakeholder
- ◆ Attend & report on public meetings
- ◆ Consult & coordinate w/ like-minded groups on shared-goal projects
- ◆ Serve as your HOA liaison to ensure key info reaches your owners.

To find out more ways to help, email: info@aqdupstate.com

AQD's 2024 Board of Directors

AQD directors live in seven Oconee and Pickens communities. They are:

Jim Codner, South Oak Pointe
John Eagar, Indian Oaks
Gary Owens, Wynward Pointe
Robert Royer, Beacon Shores
Martha Steele, Keowee I, II, III
Sue Williams, Highlands (Pickens)
Gerry Yantis, Waterford

Law Enforcement Teamwork, Oconee Crime Rates Down

Oconee County Sheriff Mike Crenshaw reports that the County's crime rate has been dropping in key categories, including violent crimes.

He credits these and other gains to cooperation among the Sheriff's Office and local Police Chiefs, well-trained, dedicated officers, community outreach and an embrace of new technologies.

For example, Chief Casey Bowling noted Seneca Police are hosting block parties to engage with neighborhoods, working with nonprofits to help the homeless, and using private funds to reunite the homeless with family.

Another example of outreach is a March 7 Sheriff's Office public forum designed to help citizens protect

personal and identifying information and avoid financial scams.

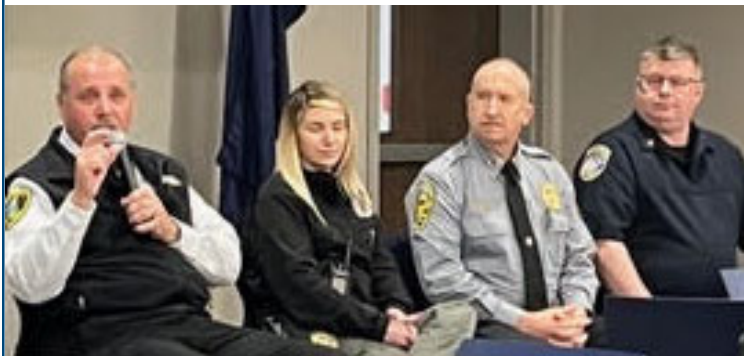
Technology

The sheriff said adoption of new technologies are helping law enforcement in a variety of ways, too. For instance, if

firefighters and law enforcement appear at opposite ends of an accident scene, they can now talk to each other. Drones with heat-seeking technology also help pinpoint the location of suspects at night.

Salaries Remain Problem

The sheriff expressed gratitude for a recent salary increase for deputies, but noted it's hard to keep newly-trained deputies due to the higher pay of competitors like the Highway Patrol.



Sheriff Mike Crenshaw & Police Chiefs Caitlin Pope, Scott Peterson, Jeff Richardson and Casey Bowling (not shown) field questions.

The sheriff made these comments at a Law Enforcement and Public Safety Community Breakfast, sponsored by the Oconee Chamber of Commerce and the Oconee Economic Alliance. AQD attended as a Chamber member.

Community Outreach

In their presentations, the police chiefs and the sheriff emphasized community outreach programs to address drug addiction and homelessness and earn neighborhood trust.



Apps for Safety

www.OconeeLaw.com

The Oconee County Sheriff's Office website's [OCSO Resources](#) tab offers links to safety phone apps and a form to anonymously report litter.



Smart911.com

With Smart911, your call to 9-1-1 displays your Safety Profile. Even if you can't speak, the operator can see your address, info about your home, pets, vehicles, medical conditions and emergency contacts. Provide as much or as little info as you like.

PURSUITALERT

Pursuit Alert App

Download this app to receive an alert any time you're within 2 miles of a high-speed law enforcement chase.

T.E.L.L. KOBIE

Together Eliminate Litter Locations

This anonymous online tool lets you report litter or illegal dumping. You will NOT be contacted by a Deputy Sheriff.

AQD Membership Mail Form & Online Options

Join or renew your AQD membership! Use this form OR visit 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 _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

MEMBERSHIP TYPE:

NEIGHBORHOOD _____

____ INDIVIDUAL \$30

____ FAMILY \$50

____ DONOR \$100

____ HOA/BUSINESS \$100

COMMENTS: _____

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOME!
