

**OCONEE COUNTY COUNCIL RETREAT
OCONEE COUNTY COUNCIL CHAMBERS
WALHALLA, SC
JANUARY 27, 2011**

Background

Oconee County Council met on Thursday, January 27, 2011 in council chambers to development both short-term and long-term goals for the county. Short-term goals were identified as those issues which need to be addressed in the next 12 to 24 months. Long-term goals were identified as those issues which need to be addressed in the next three to five years. The purpose of short-term goals is to provide staff direction in recommending a budget for Fiscal Year 2012. The purpose of long-term goals is to establish the priority issues that council has determined are necessary to meet the future needs of the citizens of Oconee County. All council members were present and participated in the vision, mission, and values discussion. However, because of a prior commitment, one member of council was unable to fully participate in the discussion of short-term and long-term goals

Introduction

Before council began to identify and prioritize their issues and goals, a discussion was held on the importance of planning for a county. Planning for the future is perhaps the most important responsibility of councils. However, it is not enough to have a plan. The plan must be evaluated on an ongoing basis to measure progress made in implementing the plan and to make adjustments as needed based on new or emerging challenges.

There must also be a direction or purpose which motivates achievement of the goals and resolution of the issues identified during the planning process. This direction or purpose is most often identified and reinforced the organization's vision and mission. In the planning process, vision has two components. The first is the ability to see what is possible. This is addressed through the discussion of vision, mission, and values. The second is the ability to see what currently exists in the environment in which Council is currently operating.

To address the future component of vision, council engaged in a facilitated discussion to reinforce their vision for the future of Oconee County, their mission or responsibility for helping move the county forward in achieving that vision, and identifying the values council members share that should be used as guides for the decisions that council makes.

To address the second component of vision a SWOT analysis was conducted to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats that currently exist. Strengths are those areas or issues that provide a foundation upon which Oconee County can adapt to the changing environment in which it currently exists. Weaknesses are those areas or issues that can cause harm to the organization if not recognized and addressed in a timely manner. If left unattended they can undermine the strengths that the county has. Opportunities are those issues and areas that can be either a positive or negative depending upon the county's decisions about how best to respond to them. Threats are those areas and issues in need of immediate action on the part of the county. Failure to respond to threats will directly impact the county's ability to meet its mission and achieve its vision for the future.

It is also important to acknowledge the successes and accomplishments of county government. While citizens may focus on only one or a few issues, county government must address a wide range of issues impacting citizens through the county. Before the SWOT analysis was conducted, council members had the opportunity to identify the successes that have been achieved.

After discussing their vision, mission, and values, as well as the environment in which they currently exist, council then spent the remainder of the retreat identifying and prioritizing both short-term and long-term issues and goals. Once the issues were identified, a 10-4 voting scheme was used to prioritize the issues. In this scheme, each member is given ten (10) 'votes' that can be cast for the issues that they feel are most important. However, they can only cast a maximum of four (4) 'votes' for any single issue. This procedure help reduce the possibility of a single council member skewing the ranking by casting all of their 'votes' for a single issue.

VISION

In discussing their vision for Oconee County, council members identified a number of issues and values they considered to be part of their vision for the future. Listed below are the elements that were mentioned:

- Environment
- EMS/Fire/Safety
- Jobs/Industry
- Education (K-12, Tri-County Tech, Work-link)
- Infrastructure
- Planning/order
- Vibrant community
- Strong financial base/diverse funding sources/financial management
- Better use of existing resources
- Better use if I-85 corridor
- Evolving, diverse population
- Best government service provider
- Meet service needs of a diverse population

Based on these elements, the following vision statements are recommended.

We want Oconee County to be respected as a modern, vibrant community that enjoys a proud rural tradition and values and offers all generations the potential for a rich quality of life through planning. *(Submitted by a council member)*

Oconee County – A diverse, growing, safe, vibrant community guided by rural traditions and shaped by natural beauty; where employment, education and recreation offer a rich quality of life for all generations, both today and tomorrow. *(My suggestion)*

(NOTE: These are just suggestions. Council should spend a bit of time reviewing the vision statement to make sure it matches the issues and concerns that they raised.)

MISSION

Oconee County's current mission statement is:

To provide quality service to our citizens and to protect our heritage and environment for the future by planning for the best utilization of our resources.

There was general consensus that that mission statement is still valid. Based on the few suggestions that were made, a proposed updated mission statement is:

It is the mission of Oconee County to provide our current and future citizens and visitors quality services and to protect our neighborhoods, heritage and environment by managing growth and change through smart, inclusive planning.

(NOTE: This is just a suggestion and I would encourage Council and staff to review the statement and make appropriate revisions. A final mission statement does not have to be included in this report. However, if it is available, it would be a nice addition.)

VALUES

- Elected by the people
- Proactive in addressing issues important to the county
- Congeniality
- Diversity in population, workforce, and ideas
- Citizen input in open, unbiased, civil, and respectful discourse
- Concerned about the entire county as well as individual district
- After decisions made council speaks with one voice
- Ethical behavior
- Set example for staff
- Make fact-based decisions
- Balance today's needs with future needs

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hiring capable County Administrator
- Settled issue with Courthouse while coming in under expected cost
- Moving forward with new jail
- Reduced millage rate
- Updated Comprehensive Plan with community input
- Purchased an industrial site
- Developed an EMS Plan
- Initiated job creation activities
- Received a grant for broadband service
- Airport runway extended
- Implemented a spay and neuter program through animal control
- Improved intergovernmental relations with other government units and non-governmental organizations through the county
- Regional partnership with Pickens and Anderson counties
- Completing reassessment through county
- Improved quality of legal services, advice, and assistance available to county

SWOT ANALYSIS

During the SWOT analysis many strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified by council and serve to facilitate informed discussion of the priority issues facing the county. They are presented here in no particular order. No attempt was made to rank or prioritize any of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats discussed.

Strengths

- Strong financial base of county
- Geographic location
- Climate
- Water supply
- Organizational size – small enough to do great things in a timely fashion (if the will is there)
- Dependable, hard-working workforce
- Low taxes
- Low cost of living
- Natural resources
- Forestry
- Sound, productive farm community
- First rate school system – K-12, Tri-County Tech, Clemson University
- First rate medical center
- Access to electricity
- Potential for water and sewer expansion
- On main rail line – CSX and Norfolk Southern
- Diverse talents in community
- Strong sense of volunteerism
- Great volunteer fire system and rescue system
- Strong industrial base – Duke Energy
- Cultural infrastructure available throughout surrounding communities

Weaknesses

- Generational poverty
- Education is not valued
- Ability to get high school diploma or GED for those who want
- Poorly implemented zoning
- Impact of special interest groups
- Form of government not always recognized
- External perception of the county as ‘backward’
- Ability to maintain political and administrative stability and not return to ‘revolving door’
- Sewer services not always where needed
- Transparency of government and becoming more transparent

- High unemployment
- Drug abuse is a local and national issue
- Too dependent on a single industry
- Failure to communicate plans (strategic, comprehensive, etc.) and successes
- Need to do a better job of communication
- Negative impact of both internal and external change

Opportunities

- View landfill as a resource
- Attract industry through better marketing of resources
- Help existing industries grow in county
- Attract 'sister companies' of existing industries to county
- Tourism growth
- Convention Center as a new attraction and to build on strengths of the county
- More active participant in regional efforts
- Be more competitive for grant opportunities
- Work with existing providers to expand sewer infrastructure that plans for future needs
- Continue to develop and strengthen intergovernmental relationships within the county
- Privatization of services
- Expand recycling
- Conduct organizational assessment of county administration with goal of providing most cost effective services
- Production of bio-fuels at landfill

Threats

- Unfunded mandates, both Federal and State
- Lack of efficiencies in government operations
- Consolidation of services while maintaining quality
- Uncertainty about the impact of Federal and State government decisions on county government
- Ability to fill vacant jobs/willingness of individuals to take available jobs
- Financial stability of hospital resulting in sale of hospital or the need to begin government subsidy of services
- Not competitive for attracting new business and industry
- Need to increase tax revenue
- County government is not 'user friendly'
- Lack of 'tools' to attract industry, including infrastructure development
- Not utilizing existing buildings to attract business and industry
- Unfunded or under-funded local liabilities (health benefits, retirement, etc.)
- County ordinances can hinder economic development
- Lack of diverse revenue sources for funding county government
- Upgrading and maintaining roads throughout county

- Timing and duration of recovery from recession
- Not being proactive

SHORT TERM GOALS

Having completed the SWOT analysis, council next began to identify the issues and goals that need to be addressed within the next 12 to 24 months. Each council member was given the opportunity to identify up to five issues or goals that they feel need to be addressed. The short term issues and goals identified included:

- Zoning implementation
- Communication of goals, objectives, accomplishments
- Complete organizational review: reengineering, create new operational budget baseline
- Complete total compensation review
- Finalize the EMS plan
- Implementation of first phase of fire/rescue plan
- Move forward on old courthouse
- New jobs
- Increase employment opportunities
- Complete our share or part of jobs creation equal to 30% - 40% improvement
- New jail
- Move forward on new jail – start construction
- New jail contract and ground breaking
- Sewer delivered to GCCP
- Begin infrastructure on I-85 corridor and Golden Corner Commerce Park
- Complete/update master infrastructure plan to include sewer and roads
- Sewer installed to Project North
- Complete key projects as scheduled: (1) Fire Plan; (2) Jail; (3) Airport; (4) Economic Development Schedule; (5) Tax reassessment
- Complete property reassessment with resident's confidence

During the in-depth discussion of these short term issues and goals, they were combined in to nine issue areas. The issue areas were next prioritized using the 10-4 voting scheme. Based on the results, the short term priorities identified by council members are:

1. Jobs and Job Retention (11)
2. Sewer Infrastructure (9)
3. Adopting the EMS Plan (6)
4. Developing a Communications Plan (4)
5. Completing a New Jail (3)
6. Administrative Review (3)
7. Zoning (2)

8. Reassessment (1)
9. Addressing the Old Courthouse (1)

During the discussion about short-term priorities, council added addressing county transportation as a 10th priority.

10. County Transportation

After identifying and prioritizing short-term issues and goals, council identified strategies and goals within each issue area. Council reinforced its reliance on and confidence in the County Administrator and staff to keep council informed of action taken and action needed. Council also reinforced its desire to provide the County Administrator the resources, both human and capital, needed to facilitate accomplishment of the goals that they have identified.

Jobs and Job Retention

- Ensure ongoing review of available economic development incentives available to both existing and prospective industries and businesses
- Maximize use of economic development incentives available to existing industries
- Continue to work with the legislative delegation to emphasize the growth issues and employment needs of Oconee County
- Continue implementation of the Economic Development Strategic Plan to include ongoing review and updates as appropriate
- Make a decision on sewer services to the Golden Corner Commerce Park
- Fast-track sewer to Project North
- Work with organizations and agencies in the county to identify existing job vacancies and develop training program to provided the county workforce the skills needed to full those jobs
- Work with the Upstate Alliance to increase the number of referrals to Oconee County
- Develop a public/private partnership for Project North

(It should be noted that several of the goals identified in the area of jobs and job retention could also be included within sewer infrastructure. They were placed within Jobs and Job Retention to reinforce their important to retaining current employment and planning for future economic development and the jobs that need to be created to meet the growing needs of Oconee County.)

Sewer Infrastructure

- Use both public and private resources to provide services to meet county-wide current and future needs
- Resolve long-term sewer issues and relationships
- Update sewer master plan with future growth in mind - link with comprehensive plan
- Update sewer basin plan

EMS Plan

- Complete the review of the proposed plan and make adjustments as needed
- Develop a phased implementation schedule for the EMS Plan to include time-line and action due dates for Council approval and submit to the Law Enforcement/Public Safety/ Health and Welfare Committee

Communications Plan

- Fully develop and implementation a county communications plan with the goal of keeping the public informed on the activities of county government to include items such as a quarterly progress report emphasizing accomplishments and costs as well as an annual report on actions taken.
- Use ongoing press releases to keep the public informed
- Emphasize the accomplishments that have been made
- Tie activities of county government to the comprehensive plan
- Council will develop goals to be used as part of an annual action plan
- Schedule ongoing town hall question and answer sessions – work with the Chamber of Commerce as appropriate to facilitate these sessions
- Consider rotation of County Council meetings through the county
- Administrator continue to do public presentations, using staff as appropriate to keep the public information

New Jail

- Expedite contracting process to begin construction as soon as realistically possible
- Provide council with an implementation schedule/timeline for construction of the new jail from current status through completion.

Administrative Review

- County Administrator should work within existing authority to begin the review process
- Council with work with the County Administrator to provide additional short-term and long-term resources as needed to fully implement ongoing review of county administration to ensure that the citizens of Oconee County are provided quality, cost effective services.

Zoning

- Provide training for Council, Planning Commission, Staff, and Citizens on the county's implementation policy for community zoning.
- Resolve ongoing issues with Planning Commission
- Identify the status of current citizen petitions for zoning
- Develop and implement a plan to work though current backlog and expedite process in the future

Reassessment

- Completion target date is May 2011
- Implement with December 2011 tax notice

Old Courthouse

- Issue is being sent to the Real Estate/Facilities/Land Management Committee for review and recommendation. Results of committee discussion are due to Council on February 15th. Included in the committee's discussion is developing and recommending a policy for addressing vacant county property.

County Transportation

- Begin development and implementation of a county road master plan

LONG-TERM GOALS

Council next moved to identifying and prioritizing long terms issues and goals. As was done with short-term goals, each council member was given the opportunity to identify five issues that they felt needed to be addressed in the next three to five years. The following issues and goals were identified by council:

- Expand/develop tourism and recreation
- Review on a continuous basis organization structure
- Formalize agreement for "Oconee County Service Company" to provide consolidated common services
- Solid waste disposal
- Finalize agreement for 2-4 year Oconee County campus
- Road issues resolved
- Complete zoning implementation
- Oconee Library (Seneca)/Oconee Library – Seneca Branch
- Complete implementation of Fire-Rescue Plan
- Project North development
- Finalize agreement for long-term private development of GCCP and Project North
- Jobs – meeting population needs
- Implement long-term aggressive workforce development program
- Golden Corner Commerce Park development
- Form citizens committee to review and recommend changes to single revenue stream
- Increase revenue pool

After a discussion of each of these areas they were consolidated into ten issue areas. Using the 10-4 voting scheme, the issue priorities were:

1. Economic Development (7)
2. Revenue Alternatives (6)
3. Expand Tourism (5)
4. Resolve Road Issues (5)
5. Address Branch Library (5)
6. 2-4 Year Campus (4)
7. Solid Waste (3)
8. Management Review/Efficiencies (2)
9. Fire and Rescue Service (2)
10. Complete Zoning (1)

Within each of these priority issues, specific goals or strategies were identified.

Economic Development

- This is an ongoing priority issues and council needs to continue to do what is can to facilitate economic development throughout the county.

Revenue Alternatives – Funding Local Government

- Begin a public education process on how government is funded and alternative funding sources that are available to help pay for government services
- Create a citizen committee to provide recommendations on funding alternatives to council

Expand Tourism/Resolve Road Issues/Branch Library

- Tourism and roads will be ongoing issues. Continue review of related issues as they arise and develop a strategy to address those issues
- Resolution of Branch Library issues

2-4 Year Campus

- Continue current discussions with Tri-County Technical College
- Identify funding sources
- Identify incentives that may be available or could be offered
- Decide where campus should be located

Solid Waste

- Keep ongoing review of usage and costs
- Continue to look for alternatives

Management Review/Efficiencies

- The goal is continuous improvement
- County Council will support County Administrator's need for resources to meet this goal

Fire and Rescue Service

- Implement Fire and Rescue Service Plan
- Develop and plan for capital and operational expenses associated with implementation
- Monitor impact of mandated training on encouraging and attracting volunteers

Complete Zoning

- Work with communities that desire zoning to ensure timely implementation of appropriate zoning