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Public notice suggests Sanderson Farms

But economic officials staying silent

Last updated: February 06, 2015 7:31PM - 1272 Views

By **Bob Shiles** - bshiles@civitasmedia.com

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ST. PAULS — Robeson County’s economic developer and industrial recruiter says two public hearings being held later this month concerning incentives for an economic development project in St. Pauls aren’t about Sanderson Farms. But others close to economic development efforts in Robeson and nearby counties aren’t so sure.

St. Pauls officials and Greg Cummings, the county’s economic developer, are staying mum about the chicken-processing facility that originally had been targeted for an industrial park in Fayetteville. But legal notices appearing in the Wednesday and Thursday editions of The Robesonian suggest that St. Pauls could be in the running.

According to Wednesday’s advertisement, the town of St. Pauls will conduct a public hearing on Feb. 16 at 6 p.m. on “Project Apple.” A similar public hearing will be held during a meeting of the Robeson County Board of Commissioners in Lumberton at the same time, according to Thursday’s advertisement.

St. Pauls Administrator J.R. Steigerwald said the St. Pauls board is expected to discuss economic incentives at the public hearing, but he would not say if Sanderson was the target. State law requires local governments to hold public hearings on incentives.

“All I can say right now, is that there is a public hearing planned,” Steigerwald said. “...We have certified state industrial sites, but no commitment has been made by any company.”

The two newspaper advertisement descriptions of the prospective industry sound a lot like Sanderson Farms. According to the ad, the company is expected to make a “\$100 million investment and create 1,000 jobs.”

Cumberland County had recently put together an incentive package that called for the 68-year-old poultry producer, headquartered in Mississippi, to spend \$95 million on the project and hire 975 employees.

When the Fayetteville deal fell apart because of opposition there, several counties, including Robeson, Sampson, Hoke and Harnett, let the company know they were interested. The plant could mean as much as \$1 million a year in property tax revenue for Robeson County if it located here.

“I don’t know if it is Sanderson,” someone close to Robeson County’s economic efforts told The Robesonian on Friday. “But it looks like it could be. There’s not too many businesses making that much of an investment and creating so many jobs that come here.

“I know Greg’s posture with us is to walk softly,” he said. “He doesn’t want to shy the company away if we still have a shot at getting the project.”

Cummings told The Robesonian last month that Robeson County has two state certified sites — each more than 500 acres with water, natural gas and near major highways — that have been submitted to the state Department of Commerce to suggest to Sanderson for consideration.

St. Pauls has one of those state-certified industrial sites on N.C. 20, about two minutes from Interstate 95.

Cummings declined to answer a reporter’s questions about what, if anything, Robeson County is doing to lure Sanderson to Robeson County. He would only say that he has not heard anything from Sanderson, and is uncertain if the company even has an interest interest in locating its new plant in North Carolina.

The public hearings on Feb. 16 will be held at the Town Hall 210 W. Blue St. in St. Pauls, and at the Robeson County Administration Building on North Elm Street in Lumberton. Both hearings begin at 6 p.m.

Written comments submitted before the hearing will be made part of the public record, according to the meeting advertisements.

Scott Witten, the editor of the St. Pauls Review, contributed to this report.

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