'A critical crossroads'

12 bidders seek broadband contract

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee officials started evaluating the bids submitted this week by a crowded field of competitors hoping to win a contract on the first phase of the county's $14.3 million broadband project.

An evaluation team headed by Procurement Director Robyn Courtright will score and rate proposals presented by 12 bidders. The team is scheduled to recommend a winning bid to County Council on Aug. 8.

Up for grab is a contract to install 95-miles of fiber in the ground. It will form the first leg of Oconee's 270-mile broadband network.

All of the bids came from companies based in the Southeast region, including two from South Carolina — Edwards Telecommunications in Columbia and Network Controls & Electric from Greer.

Also bidding are Ansco & Associates of Greensboro, N.C., Broadplex, LLC of Morgantown, N.C., Ervin Cable and Watts Brothers of Kentucky, Fiber Technologies and World Fiber Technologies of Georgia, and Hypower, Mastec North America and Trawick Construction out of Florida.



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Oconee County Administrator

County Council voted in May to re-bid the work because a company that was to install fiber throughout the entire 270-mile network for $8.2 million could not secure a performance bond.

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County Administrator Scott Moulder said he is hopeful the county has time to bid out the project in three phases, and have it completed before August 2013 as dictated by the terms of an almost $10 million federal grant the county received for the work last year.

Moulder said that the cost per foot in the bids submitted Thursday was comparable to the pricing associated with the $8.2 million contract that fell through.

"We're at a critical crossroads on this project," Moulder said during a council town hall meeting in Westminster Thursday night. "We have to make pivotal decisions moving forward."

When completed, the county's broadband network would establish a middle-mile network, or trunk line, that could be made available to Internet service providers for a fee.

The network could open the way for service in rural areas, generate competition among providers and lower costs.

Supporters also see the project as a golden opportunity to boost educational opportunities, upgrade health, safety and emergency services and stimulate economic development.

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