Amended Oconee budget includes millage increase

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County Council voted 3-2 this week to amend the proposed FY 2017 budget of more than $44 million that will include a millage increase.

During Tuesday night's regularly scheduled meeting, council approved amending the third version of the budget, which contained no millage increase, to version 4, which includes a millage increase to 1.50. Voting in favor of the amended budget were council chairman Paul Cain and council members Joel Thrift and Reg Dexter, while council members Edda Cammick and Wayne McCall voted in opposition.

Cammick told The Journal she was displeased with how the vote was handled.

"I left for a trip overseas on May 20, and when I left, we were on version 3 of the budget, balanced without a tax increase," Cammick told The Journal.

Cammick said the "discomfort" with version 3 involved the transfer of $400,000 from the rock quarry. Because she said the rock quarry management has done a superb job and their hard work contributes so much to the general fund, Cammick and council did not want to interfere with operations by removing too much money from their budget. As a result, she was determined to find $400,000 in cuts so that the transfer of funds would not be necessary and that "we could stick to version 3."

"I had planned on discussing this with council upon my return," Cammick said. "While I was away, the budget committee met and moved on to version 4 that includes a millage increase and includes a full-time Destination Oconee planner that we previously felt was premature to hire. The Destination Oconee commission had just recently been formed and met for the first time. It is premature to hire planners since there are no goals set or policies to implement, no funding and so forth. Forgoing that planner saves $56,972."

Cammick said a recent email from the Association of Counties noted that the Local Government Fund would increase by $141,761, adding that to the budget, and that county administrator Scott Moulder has $200,000 in his contingency fund (while council only has $20,000), though he can only spend up to $50,000 without council approval.

"(Moulder's) contingency can be reduced to $100,000, leaving $120,000 between administrator and council in the event something unexpected arises," Cammick said. "Similarly, in our own county attorney budget, $200,000 is set aside for professional (services), such as if we need to hire an outside attorney. I believe that can be reduced as well."

In addition, Cammick said the county does not have any sewer projects planned for this budget year, even though $610,000 continues to be set aside for the sewer commission. Cammick also suggested that staff development budgets be cut by 20 percent, with an exception for law enforcement, fire and rescue that have ongoing training needs in which all their employees need to participate.

"My pet peeve is those 'non-critical' departments taking mini vacations paid for by taxpayers in the name of education," Cammick said. "The private sector in recent years has seriously cut back on staff development. They permit one or two individuals to attend out-of-state or out-of-county meetings with the requirement that they return and educate the rest. We need to do the same.

"We have plenty of money. We don't need to take away from the rock quarry and we don't need the tax increase."


Cammick

The millage increase, which jumped from zero in version 3 to 1.5 mills in version 4, would generate an additional estimated $777,000, with the projected value of a mill being $518,000, according to earlier reports, and would also include expenditures for adding back the clerk of court part-time position to full-time court clerk, $14,564; adding back one shared planner to community development, $6,972; adding a car allowance for the administrator, $10,200; and adding the balance to the contingency, $10,848.

Local residents will have an opportunity to voice their opinion on the proposed amended budget not once but twice over the next couple of weeks. On Tuesday, county council will hold a special called meeting at the School District of Oconee County office — since county council headquarters will be in use for the Republican primary. The 6 p.m. meeting will include public hearings not only on the county's budget, but also for the School District of Oconee County and Keowee Fire Special Tax District.

At 6 p.m. June 21, a second public hearing is planned prior to a scheduled vote on third and final reading of the budget by county council.

Should council decide to postpone its vote, a special called meeting would take place prior to June 30 — the final day of the current fiscal year budget. The new fiscal year budget will formally take effect July 1 and run through June 30, 2017.

Cain, the council chairman, said the decision to hold two public meetings came after learning that the original date for Tuesday coincided with the primary election.

"If I would have recognized that sooner, I would have asked to change it (date)," Cain said. "Unfortunately, there's not quite enough time to change it. But the second public hearing will provide another opportunity for people to come out and speak. It would be more appropriate, because we don't have to advertise 15 days ahead of that since our filing requirements were satisfied (with the original public hearing date of June 14)."

goliver@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6687
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ING THE NUMBERS

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$777,000+

Budget savings proposed instead by councilwoman Edda Cammick:

Administrator contingency	$100,000
Attorney contingency	$200,000
Planner position	$56,972
Increased LGF revenue	$141,761
Sewer payment	$610,000
Total savings	$1,105,552