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Broadband bill on group's radar

Fate of Oconee's project hangs in the balance

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WALHALLA — A controversial state bill posing a threat to Oconee County's \$14.3 million broadband project is now on the South Carolina Association of Counties' radar.

AT&T is primarily supporting the bill in question in an attempt to even the playing field between private companies and government-owned broadband networks proposed by Oconee and Orangeburg counties.

Both Oconee and Orangeburg have received federal stimulus funds to establish broadband and extend services to rural and other underserved areas.

In its most recent legislative report, the SCAC calls the broadband bill "a very complex subject."

The House passed its version of the bill and the legislation is now in the Senate where it is being worked on by a Senate Judiciary



FILE PHOTO

The South Carolina Association of Counties is closely following state legislation that would negatively impact Oconee's broadband project.

subcommittee.

"The private companies want publicly-owned broadband systems to charge an equivalent of taxes," SCAC wrote in its May 6 legislative report.

"The private companies are also asking the public systems be subject to a higher level of (Public Service Commission) regulation than private systems," the report added.

County Administrator Scott Moulder has been critical of the bill because it would give AT&T and other private companies "an unfair advantage."

"They want us to be under the PSC when they don't comply," Moulder told The Journal recently.

Even if Oconee is able to add amendments to the bill that lessen the negative impact on government-owned broadband networks, it still needs a contractor to put about 260 miles of fiber optic in the ground.

County council approved an \$8.2 million contract with Southern Pipeline & Utilities, but a deal has not been signed.

SPU has yet to secure a 100 percent performance bond on the project.

Failure to get the project off the ground would result in Oconee having to give back a \$9.6 million federal grant for broadband.

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