Council benefits from strong assessments, revenues

BY MIKE EADS
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The Oconee County Council has managed to keep property tax bills mostly in check in recent years, aided by rising property valuations, up from $436.4 million in 2007 to $496.6 million this budget year. This has allowed millage rates to remain fairly constant in the face of rising overhead costs, especially fuel, utilities and employee benefits.

Oconee County Administrator Scott Moulder credits continuing industrial and retail development for the increasing values.

"You've seen increases in developed properties that are new to the tax rolls," according to Moulder. "Some of our industries have had some significant expansions that has driven up the value of their properties, including buildings and new equipment."

The county's recent reassessment also added several properties previously left off the tax rolls. There is also Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station, which accounts for more than one-quarter of the county's assessed value and is the largest property taxpayer by far.

Commercial property owners have seen their tax bills increase because their land is assessed as being more valuable, offsetting the need to seek more money from homeowners.

All of this, in turn, has made individual mils more valuable and required the county to assess less of them to maintain a consistent level of service throughout the county (see accompanying table on page A5).

Better-than-expected property tax collections have allowed the county to make its budgetary ends meet and maintain double-digital fund balances without seeking new or higher taxes. The council even rebuffed Moulder's request for a one-mil increase in rural fire funding for 2013.

The County Council, however, did give the School District of Oconee County (SDOC) more money for 2013.

After holding the line on county revenue requests for the previous three years, SDOC sought and received an 8.6 mil funding increase from the council. SDOC Superintendent Mike Lucas defended the increase as necessary to keep up with rising overhead costs and to keep the district's fund balance from dropping below 20 percent, a common accounting benchmark for school districts around the state.

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WILLIE SAYS:
There's never an excuse for profanity like that! **C3**

