Council raises taxes

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WALHALLA — The Oconee County Council voted 4-1 Tuesday to set the county's overall millage at 213, an increase of 8.7 mils over last year.

County spending will remain in check, with the increase going to offset School District of Oconee County operations. State sales tax revenues cover school operations, so local homeowners won't see higher tax bills.

"Homeowners will see no increase in their taxes from last year," said County Auditor Ken Nix.

Nix added, however, that school taxes on personal and investment properties, including businesses, will rise by 4.2 percent.

The auditor expects new bills to be mailed out to count property owners by Oct. 1.

The council's vote will force County Administrator Scott Moulder to trim the 2013 county budget by $500,000, most likely through spending cuts and increased use of the county's existing fund balance.

He is expected to have a plan to pitch to the council later this month.

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COUNCIL: 'We're trying to bring business to this county ...,' McCall said

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School and county officials haggled through much of May and June over SDOC's request for the council to approve a $1.6 million increase in spending for 2013, after holding at $40.4 million for the previous three years.

School District of Oconee County Superintendent Mike Lucas told the council prior to its vote, "We ask you to fund the amount because we have no where else to cut."

Lucas told The Journal afterward, "I'm very pleased that the council approved the millage."

Council member Wayne McCall, a frequent critic of Lucas and SDOC spending, suggested to Lucas that the school district dip further into its fund reserves to avoid the millage hike. Lucas resisted the suggestion.

McCall was clearly irritated after the 4-1 vote in favor of the millage hike.

"The school board has the money in reserve," McCall told his colleagues. "At some point, this council has to say cut it off" to requests for more school spending. He added after the meeting, "We're trying to bring business to this county and we're putting this (millage rise) on the backs of industry."

Nix said the county's assessed valuation will be $496.6 million, with a mil equaling $496,627. The school district's AV will be $517.5 million, with a mil equaling $517,569.

IN OTHER BUSINESS:

- The council approved the third and final reading on a $1.6 million bond issue to build a new home for the Anderson-Oconee Behavioral Health Service in Seneca. The bond will be repaid over 15 years by the group's lease payments to the county.
- The county will pay $100,000 to Independent Health Services of Rainsville, Ala., for pharmacy services next year for county jail inmates. The council voted to let Moulder negotiate up to four annual renewals of the agreement.
- The purchase of more land for the county's rock quarry operation was approved on second reading. Deputy Administrator Glenn Breed told the council the land would extend the operation's profitability and life span.
- The council voted to spend $203,000 to purchase eight new vehicles for the Oconee County Sheriff's Office, including five cruisers, through a state contract with Love Chevrolet of Columbia.

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