Councilman insists Oconee taxes could have been lower

Wayne McCall blames himself, rest of council for not cutting school taxes

By CARLOS GALARZA
carlos@dailyjm.com

WALHALLA — Outspoken Oconee County Councilman Wayne McCall refused to shy away on Wednesday from his dissatisfaction over what he and the rest of the council could have done to lower taxes.

McCall was the lone dissenting vote on Tuesday night against a new millage of 215.3 or 1.4 mills less than the millage set in the previous 2008-09 fiscal year. He said the reduction was not enough and puts the blame on himself, and others, for not cutting taxes more.

Specifically, the colorful councilman who represents District 2 in Walhalla, said council could have cut the schools' budget. McCall even quoted Shakespeare in expressing his displeasure with the millage.

Although the total county millage was reduced, the school portion rose to 142.4 mills or 0.9 of a mill more than the 141.5 total school millage set the previous fiscal year.

Since the 2006-07 fiscal year when the total school millage was at 131.0, taxes to operate schools have gone up 8.7 percent.

The value of the mill also is higher for school operations ($522,098) than for county operations ($481,048).

The value of the county mill has increased 36.7 percent since fiscal 2006 when it

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was $351,772. During the same period, the value of the school mill has increased 31.5 percent since it was at $396,753 in fiscal 2006.

The new millage will fund Oconee's $43.3 million operations budget and $56.4 million for schools.

McCall said council might have lost an opportunity to trim school spending.

"The whole County Council is to blame," McCall said. "We should have cut the school district."

McCall said his criticism has nothing to do with the job that new Auditor Ken Nix did in presenting the recommended millage.

"He's doing his job," McCall said. "He did an excellent job of explaining everything."

Nix used a PowerPoint presentation to pinpoint 12 taxes, including residential and property, that make up assessed values. He said the cut-off date for calculating assessed value was Sept. 11.

Residential assessments for fiscal year 2009 that ended June 30 increased by $15 million, Nix said. He attributed that to the new HighPointe apartments and continued construction of multimillion-dollar homes in Cliffs Communities.

Nix said that for a $100,000 residence with homestead exception, homeowners could expect to pay about $207.80 in taxes with the new millage rate, or $4.60 less than a year ago. Owners of residential property without homestead would pay about $415.60, or $9.20 less from last year.