County projects list nears $100 million

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee County likely will have to spend close to $100 million over the next 10 years to address pressing needs, Finance Director and Assistant Administrator Kendra Brown told the County Council this week.

The preliminary report comes as elected officials are pressed to explain why Oconee has amassed cash reserves that surpass the current $43.6 million budget as amended at Tuesday night's Council meeting.

Brown delivered her report six months after directed by Council to do so after she and her Finance Department staff discovered that the county had rolled over more than $6.6 million of unspent capital funds from previous years.

'We want to be ready for big expenditures.'

Kendra Brown
Oconee County finance director, assistant administrator

Brown said the county is looking at dishing out more than $97 million over the next 10 years on capital projects, including $54.1 million in the next three years to cover such things as

SEE PROJECTS, PAGE 6A

The Journal
11/5/09

PROJECTS ... List nearing $100M

FROM PAGE 1A

additional jail space, modifications to the courthouse to comply with American with Disabilities Act requirements, a new fire station for Westminster and replacement of Cobb Bridge.

The list of needs, which does not include projects that would cost less than $100,000, has yet to be reviewed by council.

Brown said the list is preliminary and intended to show priorities and a financial plan for the future.

"We want to be ready for big expenditures," Brown said.

Later in the meeting, Councilman Paul Corbeil unveiled a new set of financial figures that sh[illegible]ow the county has in ha[illegible]d $49.4 million as of J[illegible]une 30. However, Corb[illegible]eil said the total amou[illegible]t is misleading.

He sa[illegible]d that when deductio[illegible]s are made, including k[illegible]eeping an $18 million cushion for six months to maintain bond rating and for emergencies, as well as $9.1 million for pending capital projects, the actual remaining cash balance dwindles to $601,966. He said that does not address an additional $23 million needed to expand and improve the jail, make improvements to the courthouse and cover hea[illegible]th care liabilities.

But obse[illegible]vers contend that Corb[illegible]l's figures fail to tak[illegible] into account new tax r[illegible]venue that would have come into the county's coffers since June 30.

Tax collections from July 1 through Dec. 31 of 2008 brought $14.3 million in to the county.

In another development, Council unanimously approved a contract with The Mercer Group of Atlanta to help Oconee hire a new county administrator.

Jim Mercer, the firm's founder, told council that it is getting more difficult to find good help because "the good ones are happy where they are." He said a lot of people are hunkered down because of the economy.

"The pool is beginning to dry up," Mercer said.

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