County still not ready to sign with main broadband firm

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — The Oconee County Council has approved a $2 million purchase of fiber optic material for a $14.3 million broadband project.

Council gave the green light to the purchase Tuesday night although a contract with the company that would put the fiber in the ground is still unsigned.

County Administrator Scott Moulder said the county's $8.2 million deal with Southern Pipeline & Utility is on hold because the firm is still be vetted.

Moulder said all contingencies required by council must be cleared before a contract could be signed.

"We're working through that," Moulder told council.

Councilman Wayne McCall, who voted against the fiber optic purchase, argued that if a contract with SPU is not signed the county could end up owning $2 million in fiber that another company might not want to use.

Moulder said that would not be a likely scenario because the county would not hire a company that did not use the fiber Oconee wants for its system.

"We want to control what fiber material is used in our system," Moulder said. "We don't want a contractor making that decision."

Procurement Director Robyn Courtright said the county would not buy all the fiber optic material at once from the supplier, OFS Fitel, LCC of Carrollton, Ga. She said the fiber would be purchased in stages.

"We're not going to put in a purchase order until we've worked everything out with the contractor," Courtright added.

Councilman Paul Corbeil addressed public concerns about Oconee's investment to the broadband project on top of the $9.6 million federal grant anchoring it.

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Corbeil said that by the county's calculations it would recover its investment in the second year of operating the broadband system. He said at no time would Oconee's investment exceed $1 million.

Corbeil reiterated that the project is good for economic development and education.

"We've done a good job to assure it is a good project financially," Corbeil said. "This is a big project. If at any time we feel a hiccup coming it would be brought to our attention."