Federal money available for Seneca library

$100 million USDA program for rural libraries could filter down to Oconee

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THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee library officials are getting ready to present Oconee County Council with a proposal to finance a new $9.1 million Seneca branch using federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds.

The financing option open to the county is made available through $100 million earmarked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for its Community Facilities funds for public libraries throughout the nation. Approximately $500,000 in additional grant money has been allotted to South Carolina.

Local library officials on Thursday heard an informal presentation from USDA Rural Development representatives about the unique funding program that leverages federal grant money with a 40-year loan at 4 percent interest rate.

Jesse Risher told local officials that the designated funding for rural libraries has only recently become available. He said serious discussions are underway in about five other counties looking to take advantage of the program.

Risher said that David Goble, the director of the South Carolina State Library, gave him leads of areas that could benefit from the library funding initiative. Goble recommended the Seneca library project, among others.

"We really want to be a part of this project," Risher told local library officials. "This initiative won't exist next year. We know we have this initiative now."

Debi Green, Rural Development Area Specialist at the USDA office in Anderson, accompanied Risher to the meeting.

"Once the money is gone, it is gone," she said.

Green said it has been her experience that to date, Oconee County has not taken advantage of federal stimulus money available to communities.

Participating in Thursday's meeting at the Seneca library were Oconee County Public Library Director Sue Baldwin, branch manager Blair Hinson, OCPL Board of Trustees Chair Biff Kennedy and former Chair John Adams. City of Seneca Planning Director Ed Halbig also sat in on the meeting.

Risher said Oconee County would have to apply for the loan, which would be secured through a General Obligation Bond. Grant money also would be made available to reduce the cost of borrowing, but he could not say what the amount of the grant could be.

Green said that the $100 million initiative is all grant money, but loans must be part of the package to make it work.

"Will Oconee commit to a loan?" Green asked.

The answer to that question should be known in the coming days when a formal presentation is made to the county.

The Oconee School District donated approximately 5 acres adjacent to Blue Ridge Elementary School in Seneca for the future library. However, identifying funding sources for the project has been a sticking point between the county and library officials.

In making its recommendations for "Priority Capital Projects" to the County Council, the Planning Commission downgraded the library project from "important" category to "near-term future needs."

Library officials are hopeful that the USDA offer will give their push to build a new library in Seneca momentum.

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