Finding new county administrator

Taxpayers won't be burned by one-sided contract, officials say

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County officials are promising taxpayers that they'll take all the necessary precautions this time around to keep the county from getting burned by any sweet contract that rewards departing administrators.

County Council Chairman Reg Dexter and Vice Chairman Joel Thrift talked at length about the search for a new administrator during a recent sit-down interview with The Journal.

Two of the past three county administrators — Ron Rabun and Dale Surrett — were terminated before their contracts expired. Both instances cost taxpayers several hundred thousand dollars in salaries and benefits.

Thrift said things will be different next time.

"We are not going to put the fox in the chicken house," he said. "By that I mean we're not going to let the new administrator write his own contract, so to speak."

In the conclusion of a two-part question-and-answer interview, the two council leaders also discuss the pending litigation concerning the poorly built courthouse, the efforts to build a new jail and their assessment of the challenges and opportunities facing council in 2010.

Q: Now that council has an executive firm searching for candi-

SEE PRIORITY, PAGE 5A

Oconee's top priority



JESSICA NELMS I STAFF

Oconee Council Chairman Reg Dexter, right, and Vice Chairman Joel Thrift think the county made progress in 2009 but has much more to do in 2010.

PRIORITY: Finding new county boss

FROM PAGE 1A

dates to fill the open county administrator position, do you regret not going this route earlier? Do you think future councils should follow this course?

Thrift: I think that's up to future councils. But I don't regret what we did, because we've probably done something in Oconee County that's probably never transpired before; we had the public involved. I don't regret that at all.

Dexter: I'd like to indicate that some of the candidates that we would not want to put in the final list ended up being finalists in several other counties in South Carolina. To me, it's extremely important we come up with the very best, maybe even better than that, so we don't end up in a situation where we're going through this process so many times in the future. It's become an expensive process.

Q: Given Oconee's poor track record for retaining administrators, is there anything that could be done going forward to end costly payouts to administrators that don't work out?

Thrift: We are not going to put the fox in the chicken house. By that I mean we're not going to let the new administrator write his own contract, so to speak. We will have input. We want to be fair to both sides. The contracts that have been done in the past, in my personal opinion, never lived up to that standard.

Q: Council recently approved a settlement to receive $825,000 from the architect of the problem-riddled courthouse. Given that the county might have to spend millions to renovate the courthouse, and has already spent thousands on legal fees, didn't the architect get off easy? Wasn't the county better off taking its chances in a jury trial?

Thrift: This has been going on for six or seven years. The architect (F.J. Clark) is bankrupt. They're no longer in business. They did several buildings. We're one of many in that long list of lawsuits. Clark had a $1 million insurance bond. The other side was using money from that $1 million bond to fight us. In other words, they were paying their own attorney out of that fund.

Dexter: Again, the best way to take a look at this is ... this particular well is dry. The architect, he's dry. It's not as if there's a lot of other money out there. The thing that dawned on me is that when this ($1 million) figure kept going down ... I said, 'What's going on?' The architect's attorneys are drawing from this fund. This is absolutely crazy.

If from the very beginning, the past council would have said: 'This guy is no longer in operation, we have a $1 million bond, let's take it ...' then we wouldn't have been looking at $825,000, it would have been $1 million. It would never have been higher.

Q: Oconee still has pending litigation with the builder of the courthouse. What are your expectations? Is a settlement the best way to go, or will the case go to trial?

Thrift: From a legal aspect, we can't get into this. There is more than one way to settle. We want the courthouse fixed. Our opinion is we need to move forward with some kind of closure, and I feel we're on the right track to do that.

Q: Although the council has moved forward to build a $2.5 million Emergency Services building in Westminster, a decision on the jail is pending. When do you expect council will be ready to make a final decision on a detention center?

Dexter: I believe I'm correct by saying that all five of us agree we have a jail problem. We have a detention center that's outdated and overcrowded. We have been given three types of plans ... renovation, which happens to be the most expensive. The second most expensive was to build a new section and also do a little bit of the old section. The least expensive is to build a new one. Once that decision has been made, we have some other things to look at related to cost.

Thrift: What we've got to do as a council is determine, along with the Sheriff's Department, and other knowledgeable people in this business, is what we want for Oconee County. That's No. 1. Time frame and all that should be early spring to make that determination. Then six months for architectural drawings. That's an expensive process. That's into $1 million just for architectural drawings. Then the bidding process will probably take another two months. You'll be looking at late 2010.

Q: What have been the most difficult decisions you've had to make in 2009?

Thrift: All of them. We've had a pretty good plate to start with. Our intent was to make Oconee

is at top of Oconee's list, officials say

County user friendly, cheaper to operate and more efficient. Those things have changed, that, and transparency. We wanted you to see what we did. We have invested toward how it works. There's been a learning curve.

Dexter: For me, it's not so much making difficult decisions, but realizing the impact of decisions. There have been a lot of decisions out there. The most difficult was dealing with the administrator because of the impact. We were beginning a new budget with three new people and then the council went from five (the resignation of George Blanchard) to four. I'm not going back on that decision. The decision made needed to be made, but I'm talking about the down-the-road ramifications.

Q: Looking over the past year, what has the council accomplished?

Thrift: We've made some tough decisions regarding the council and the administrator. I think we set the stage for better county government. We've done all within our power to give our employees and citizens confidence by having a lot of meetings and sharing the information. We put it out there. We put ourselves out there. We don't have anything to hide. We hired a new attorney to go in a little different direction. That's no reflection on Mr. (Brad) Norton. He served the past council well. We thought that with the courthouse issue and other issues, it was time for a fresh approach. We knew we were going to be criticized for the money that Mr. (Tom) Martin makes, but believe me he's earned his money. We have strived to develop a cooperation and partnership with our municipalities. We listen to their needs and desires. We're not enemies. We need to share. We moved forward on southern sewer. We finally have the Westminster fire-emergency facility nailed down.

Dexter: That (Westminster fire-emergency building) was at one point around $10 million, and we got it down to $2.5 million. I'd like to go back to the fact that we've had a lot more meetings. That's exactly what we wanted to do. Does it take more of my time? Of course it does, but I was put there to serve the citizens.

Q: What do you see as the major challenges and opportunities for you and the council in 2010?

Thrift: The No. 1 thing is jobs. We need to create an atmosphere for manufacturers, or whatever, as long as it's a good industry that'll give our citizens good opportunities for employment. Everybody's worried about their families, and rightly so. We have a focused council. We want to bring jobs and opportunities. We're going to work diligently in 2010 to provide anyone wanting to create jobs and opportunity in Oconee County to do just that.

Dexter: Up there with (jobs) is coming up with a really excellent administrator and tying that in with the concept of providing services in the most efficient way. There's two ways that you could look at a budget ... we look to find new monies so we could provide the services ... or we're trying to save money that may involve reducing services. That's the way you really look at it when you're in the type of recession that we're in.

Q: What will you be doing differently when you begin the budget process this second time around?

Thrift: Examine everything more closely.

Dexter: I see two groups out there that contribute almost 100 percent to the budget process, at least to the expenditures of it. One is County Council and the other is the school board. The council has to look at how it's spending its money, but so does the school board. It can't be a one-way street.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-2375