Former administrator offers his view on firing

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WALHALLA — Former County Administrator Dale Surrett issued a press release Wednesday chronicling his view of the events leading up to his demise as administrator, thanking people who encouraged him as well as county employees and expressing pride for the "accomplishments" of his tenure.

Surrett, who was hired in June 2007 as the fourth Oconee administrator in as many years, was relieved of his duties near midnight, April 15. Three new council members — Wayne McCall, Reg Dexter and Joel Thrift — voted for his ouster. Councilmen George Blanchard and Mario Suarez voted against the action, which came after a nearly five-hour Tuesday meeting that included two executive sessions. Blanchard subsequently resigned.

In his press release, Surrett said he was told by Suarez in the fall of 2008 that Daily Journal/Daily Messenger owner Jerry Edwards had said Surrett would not be the administrator after the first of the year.

Edwards denies the claim.

"I had no such conversation with Mario Suarez, either last fall or at any other time," Edwards said. "It is unfortunate that things didn't work out for Dale Surrett here and that he has chosen to throw a few stones on his way out the door. Nevertheless, I wish him well in his future endeavors."

Surrett goes on to say that after Dexter and Thrift met with Assistant Administrator Kendra Brown, he requested a meeting that was held at Thrift's Westminster business. He said the two councilmen asked him to resign at that meeting, saying they wished to have a new administrator with no connections to the prior council. Additional meetings followed.

"... We had meetings and conversations with members of the council and the county attorney with the intent to resolve any concerns the new council may have," Surrett's statement said. "The three new members of council, instead, chose to terminate my contact (sic) for reasons that I disputed as factual."

The two sides eventually agreed to a settlement that pays Surrett an additional $53,000 on top of his regular $106,000 salary plus benefits for one year. He will also receive all unused sick and vacation leave.

Surrett goes on to thank people who encouraged him and the "dedicated employees of the county."

"I am proud of the accomplishments they have achieved during my time with Oconee County and wish them the best as they continue to serve the residents and visitors of Oconee County," he said.

Dexter, chairman of the County Council, said he was not aware Surrett planned to issue a statement and expressed surprise at the move. Asked if he felt any part of the news release violated the terms of the settlement agreement, Dexter declined to comment, saying he would refer the matter to County Attorney Tom Martin.