Make it or break it for broadband?

Special Oconee County Council meeting

Monday could be pivotal

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Coming up on the first anniversary of Oconee County receiving almost $10 million in federal stimulus money to establish a 270-mile broadband network, Oconee County Council will hold a special meeting Monday that could make or break the project.

The fate of the project hangs in the balance because little progress has been made on getting it started since the county announced Aug. 18, 2010, that it had secured the $9.6 million American Reinvestment and Recovery Act giveaway.

County staff will recommend to council on Monday the awarding of two broadband contracts that could put the project back on track.

Procurement Director Robyn Courtright announced this week that an evaluation committee selected Network Controls & Electric of Greer to install fiber-optic cabling for the first phase of the project covering approximately 95 miles.

Network Controls submitted the lowest price at $5.44 per foot, which would put the contract at more than $2.7 million.

County staff also is recommending that a $296,208 contract be awarded to Geovision of Sylva, N.C., for engineering and permitting services on the remaining portion of the broadband network.

Although the majority of council supports the project and believe it is an essential economic development drawing card in today's economy, expect a discussion Monday on the project's viability.

Recently, Councilman Paul Corbeil — who supports the project — voiced the need to make sure taxpayers are protected from any liabilities.

"We have to make sure the financial risks associated with a project of that magnitude is well understood and we can manage the risks," Corbeil said.

The grant requires a county match of approximately $4.7 million.

Officials made an initial investment of $1 million from the county's fund balance and expect that investing partners would provide future funding.

Provisions of the grant give the county a three-year window to use the money in establishing the broadband network.

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IF YOU GO

What: Special Oconee County Council meeting
When: Monday, 6 p.m.
Where: Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St., Walhalla