Millions 'floating' in county coffers for development

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WALHALLA — No one seems to have a grip on how much money Oconee County really has, which complicates the ominous task of deciding major economic development issues.

On any given day, there may be as much as $40 million in cash in various county accounts, not that the county could lay claim to it on the spur of the moment or even attempt to use it all since some funds are restricted. The question of how much is available is something the current County Council wants to know.

"We are going to look at capital funds," Councilman Reg Dexter said in a recent interview. "What has been set aside for projects? That's being researched. If we do have funds set aside for a particular project, we have to see that."

Acting Administrator and Finance Director Kendra Brown has been tasked with crunching the numbers and reviewing the county's many accounts. It's a daunting task.

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Consider just these few findings from the last audit:

■ The county underspent its budget by $9.2 and $6 million the past two years, respectively, seemingly adding $15.2 million to its reserves. Typically, those funds are carried over to the next budget

■ The county's general fund had an ending balance of $18.3 million, $7.8 million of which was undesignated

■ The "government-wide financial analysis" lists assets of $159 million, including $41.6 million in non-capital assets. That's cash. Additionally, the analysis points to $143 million in net assets (after liabilities) of which $23 million is unrestricted

■ "Net assets that the county can use to finance normal operations without any restrictions, increased from the prior year by $6.2 million for a total of $20 million." However, the county has "designated" all but $7.8 million of that amount. "Designated funds" are not restricted, however, and could be used for other purposed.

The 2007-08 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (Available at www.oconeesc.com) lists non-major capital projects funds of $9.8 million of which nearly $6 million is designated but unreserved.

Included in this amount is $1,698,879 in a line item called "infrastructure." That amount includes a fund balance of $1,270,634 to which another $422,290 was added that year. Given a likely carryover equal to or greater than that amount in 2008-09, the line item may well be more than $2 million at this point. This is essentially money derived from a 1 mill economic development set aside each year.

There is another $1 million in the Reidhead property (Golden Corner Commerce Park) line item. This includes a fund balance of $640,529 and a "revenue" of $370,952. A "BellSouth fund" held $301,808 at the end of that year. The source and anticipated use of these funds is not clear by an examination of the audit alone.

There was also nearly $1 million in an "I-85 Infrastructure" fund. This is believe to be money set aside in early 2008 when Duke Energy made up a three-year underassessment with a $6 million tax payment to the county.

There is also $609,947 in an "other county infrastructure" fund. This is believed to be money carried over from various infrastructure projects that were either not done or came in under budget.