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Money for park renovation advances

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SENECA — City council voted unanimously Tuesday to use funds from the city's Peak Shaving Account to pay for the Norton-Thompson improvements.

Last year, the city of Seneca was awarded a $515,000 grant by the South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) to repave and improve the parking lot of Norton-Thompson Park at the heart of downtown to improve the appearance of the park and its surrounding areas.

Council has already approved a measure allowing the city's planning and development director, Ed Halbig, to file an application asking SCDOT to relinquish control of Townville, Depot and Railroad streets to more effectively alter those roads in their proximity to the park.

The grant money from SCDOT, however, has been trickling in.

"Some of the payment schedules have been a little bit slow coming down through the DOT, and we don't want that to hurt anyone locally," said Administrator Greg Dietterick.

"All we're doing is saying we have this money that we've saved through peak shaving and want to pay bills as they come in and take the contract amounts, stimulus monies, grant moneys as they come in and put them back into account."

"Peak shaving," is a money-saving practice implemented in Seneca's energy contract with Progress Energy. When the city first entered into the contract with Progress in July of 2004, it stipulated that the city would be charged not only on usage, but on demand, meaning that when all of Progress' customers hit a peak usage, Seneca must pay the same rate seen by the rest of the customers.

Seneca has multiple generators capable of providing electricity to its customers without Progress' help, and these generators are turned on by the city during Progress' peak period on a monthly basis, saving the city more than $44,000 on a monthly basis through peak shaving.

That saved money is then placed into account, with specific restrictions on usage. Ordinance 2004-16, signed by Mayor Dan Alexander on July 29, 2004, restricts the usage of the money to reduce bond indebtedness for the direct cost savings benefits for citizens of the city, business licenses or utility customers.

Advancing funds from the Peak Shaving Account as needed as bids are awarded in the Norton-Thompson Park's phases will allow the project to be completed more swiftly, Dietterick said, allowing the account to be reimbursed upon receipt of SCDOT grant money.

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