Oconee County OKs $3M for broadband project

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THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County officials gave the broadband project a much-needed $3 million vote of confidence this week.

County Council voted unanimously Tuesday night to approve contracts of $2.6 million to purchase switching equipment, and $622,500 to hire a system operator for the fiber-optic system.

However, the vote of confidence came after a strong dose of scrutiny from Councilman Wayne McCall, who has not been completely sold on the financial sustainability of the project.

McCall asked Administrator Scott Moulder whether the county had secured any contracts with internet service providers.

"No one will sign until the system is up and running," Moulder answered.

It was not what McCall wanted to hear.

"I think we're getting ahead of ourselves," McCall said.

Councilman Paul Corbeil interjected a more positive tone. He said that the Clemson University Information Technology Department was working closely with Oconee County.

Corbeil added that federal officials are monitoring the progress of the project on a quarterly basis.

Oconee County received $9.6 million in federal stimulus funding in August 2010 to construct a 270-mile broadband network that would provide access to more than 25,000 households, 2,200 businesses and 75 public facilities including Oconee Medical Center, schools, libraries and emergency shelters.

Oconee IT Director Mike Powell told council that workers are approaching 50 miles of conduit that has been placed in the ground and would start pulling fiber through the conduit next week.

The first phase of the project covers approximately 95 miles and is to be completed by February.

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FILE PHOTO

Workers have placed almost 50 miles of fiber conduit in the ground since the first phase of Oconee's $14.3 million broadband project began last month. The first 95 miles of the 270-mile project is to be completed by February.