Oconee: Deception

led to airport delay

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Deceptive actions by the project manager overseeing the runway extension at the Oconee County Regional Airport have caused the project to stall and significantly increase its costs, county officials said Wednesday.

The project manager with Talbert & Bright, an airport consulting firm based in Wilmington, N.C., led Oconee officials to believe that a necessary stormwater permit had been obtained when, in fact, it had not.

"At the time, the engineer informed Oconee County that a stormwater permit was in place in accordance with state and federal laws, and that the project was ready to proceed," County Administrator Scott Moulder said in a statement released Wednesday. "In fact, Oconee County was shown either the original or a copy of the permit."

Moulder issued the statement amid increasing scrutiny and questions regarding the delay of the $4.2 million project.

The public relations nightmare exploded in Moulder's lap a few weeks into his tenure as the new county administrator. The matter surfaced after heavy rains led to sediment runoff into Lake Hartwell and complaints to DHEC.

When the state agency went to review the permits, they realized none had been issued.

"When Oconee County heard from S.C. DHEC (Department of Health and Environmental Control), we quickly understood the seriousness of the situation," Airport Director Kevin Short was quoted as saying.

DHEC had no comment on what appears to be the falsification of papers or misrepresentation on the part of the unidentified project manager. Earlier, the agency said its policy was to issue no comment on matters that "may or may not be under investigation."

Talbert & Bright principal Jay Talbert did not return a phone message.

Stormwater plans were submitted to DHEC in April, but those plans have had to be modified to meet the agency's guideline and include additional stormwater controls.

In the meantime, Moulder said he is evaluating two claims filed by the project contractor, Plateau

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Excavation, Inc. of Georgia, for approximately $600,000. Part of the claim is to recover losses for having the company's equipment and crew idle at the project site.

Moulder said the county has applied to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for an additional $500,000 in grant funds to cover the new stormwater requirements by DHEC.

According to FAA spokesperson Kathleen Bergen, while the additional work required by DHEC is eligible for federal funding, she said the cost of the delays from not having the permit is not eligible.

Despite the difficulties surrounding Talbert & Bright's project manager, whose fate still is unknown, Moulder said the county "has every intention to fulfill its obligations under various contracts" related to the project. He said the county expects the same from the engineer and contractor.

"Needless to say, Oconee County is working very hard to ensure that no stone remains unturned in protecting taxpayers of Oconee County from any liability or unwarranted costs caused by this unfortunate situation," Moulder said.

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