Oconee OKs $200K more for 'frustrating' broadband project

Wayne McCall: 'We can't keep going like this'

'It's not just a fart in the wind that we just don't know what we're doing.'

Scott Moulder
Oconee County administrator

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — After admitting Project FOCUS has become a "frustrating" endeavor, Oconee County Council voted unanimously Tuesday to approve $200,000 more toward maintenance services for the broadband project.

The consensus, it seemed, is it's too late to turn back now.

Concerns were expressed during the public comment session over the project's cost to taxpayers and extended timeframe — with one commenter pointing to an article in Tuesday's edition of The Journal in which some Internet service providers (ISPs) voiced displea

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sure with the venture.

Councilman Wayne McCall said he has heard similar concerns from his constituents and believes the project is reaching the point of no return.

"This is going to be the last time I'm going to be able to support anything like this," he said. "If this keeps dragging out longer, we're going to have to answer to the taxpayers at some point.

"Either we're going to have to pull the plug on it — I hope not — or we're going to have to do something, because we can't keep going like this."

County administrator Scott Moulder admitted a "frustration level" has built up, but suggested rumors of the county's failings in handling the project are exaggerated.

"Just to use an old phrase — you can't believe everything you read in the paper," he said.

Moulder said he is spending "probably 45 to 50 percent of (his) time during the day" dealing with the broadband issue, but believes the project will pay dividends if seen through to fruition.

The county administrator said the biggest issue with the project currently lies with the "last-mile construction business," which he said the county never intended to enter into when it began the project, and he pointed the finger back at the ISPs.

"The initial goal of this was to be a middle-mile network, relying on the ISPs to be the last-mile providers and installers," Moulder said. "What we're finding is they aren't willing to do that.

"Everybody keeps pointing fingers at the county to go beyond the intention of what this system was designed to do, and everybody wants to put the county at risk, and everybody wants us to bear the financial responsibility for free on their behalf ... but we can't be the sole installer of fiber throughout the entire county."

Moulder said the county is being asked to run 2,000 more miles of fiber throughout the entire county.

Having spent $15 million to run 242 miles already, according to Moulder, the county is now facing a prospective cost of between $150 million and $300 million if it were to actually follow through with the aforementioned undertaking.

"There's a frustration level," he said. "Everybody is feeling it. I'm feeling it just as much as the citizens are and just as much as the county is.

"We've got two choices: Either we shut off the lights, lock the door and walk away from $4.5 million of loan-to-match money ... or we can continue the fight and continue down the road of trying to make this thing work."

BROADBAND: Two residents w

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veigh in on matter at meeting

Moulder said by the end of the month the project will begin to generate a projected recurring revenue of $65,000 to $70,000 per month to help ease the pressure of the operating capital.

"I can assure you this thing is being managed properly and being managed with the proper business mentality that it needs to be managed with," he said. "It's not just a fart in the wind that we just don't know what we're doing."

The council ultimately voted to approve a maximum of $200,000 for the services, although McCall said his vote only came "with great reservation."

"I don't care what the newspaper says," he said. "The newspaper doesn't vote for me. The people in Walhalla and my district vote for me, and those are the ones I've got to answer questions from who'll be calling my shop tomorrow wanting to know what's going on."

McCall was careful to make clear he wasn't directing blame toward Moulder because he believed he is "doing (his) job."

The vote allowed the county to renew its maintenance services deal with GeoVision Services Inc. of Sylva, N.C., through June 30, 2015.

It was the recommendation of county staff to award the construction work — which includes fiber testing and trouble-shooting, engineering, and permitting and egress for new installations — to GeoVision, which undertook 26 projects in fiscal 2013-14 for the county at a cost of $159,110.28.

To begin Tuesday's council meeting, two residents offered public comments on the matter, with one of them, Bozo Richards, who sits on the planning commission, expressing concerns over uncertainty with the project.

"I think it's time council or the administrator come forward and let the taxpayers know," he said. "You're going to authorize another $200,000; is it money going down a rat hole? Is it really worthwhile, or are we kidding ourselves?"

After the vote, council chairman Joel Thrift lauded Moulder for his work on Project FOCUS — which stands for Fiber Optics Creating Unified Solutions — although he admitted the endeavor has been "frustrating."

"But I think the end results will be very fruitful for Oconee County," Thrift said.

Moulder responded: "Believe me, I've learned more about this business than I ever wanted to know."

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