Oconee airport project needs permit

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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SENECA — A handful of heavy equipment sat idly on the grounds of the Oconee County Regional Airport on Friday, just as it did a week ago.

As weeks turn to months, the airport's $4.2 million runway extension project remains grounded.

Four months ago, the airport was a hub of construction activity as machines and trucks moved in and out, digging up and hauling hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of dirt needed to add 600 feet to the east of the existing 4,400-foot runway.

In March, Plateau Excavation, the Georgia company handling the job, added more men in a push to have the project completed by the target date of Aug. 17, in time for the approaching Clemson University football season.

That was before, as Oconee County Administrator Scott Moulder stated June 30: "The bottom fell out of the project."

The Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) ordered Oconee to halt the project after it determined that a stormwater permit had never been obtained for the project.

Engineers with Talbert & Bright, the Wilmington, N.C., aviation consultant responsible for the planning and permitting of the project, told the county that a stormwater permit was in place, and even showed an original or copy of the permit.

If, as state regulators claim, the permit was never obtained, did Talbert & Bright forge or falsify a permit?

DHEC won't comment beyond saying that its practice "is to not comment on specifics of investigations that may or may not be underway."

Talbert & Bright has exclusively overseen more than $11 million of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) funded projects at the local airport since 1990.

For weeks, Talbert & Bright has dodged questions by The Journal related to the permit issue.

In the meantime, Moulder indicated Friday that the county continues to wait on DHEC's permit approval of new stormwater plans submitted.

"Our main focus at this time is satisfying the needs of DHEC and ensuring that Talbert & Bright perform their responsible duties in obtaining the permit," Moulder said.

The county still is evaluating a contract extension with Plateau Excavation, as well as two invoices for $600,000 that the company presented to Oconee, Moulder said. The invoices mostly go to cover losses caused by the delay in construction.

Moulder added that the county has yet to determine whether Talbert & Bright should pay for part or all of Plateau's invoices.

The airport project, when completed, would give Oconee a 5,000-foot runway, long enough for larger corporate jets to land and take off. Airport officials have said that would help increase fuel revenue.

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