Oconee cans administrator

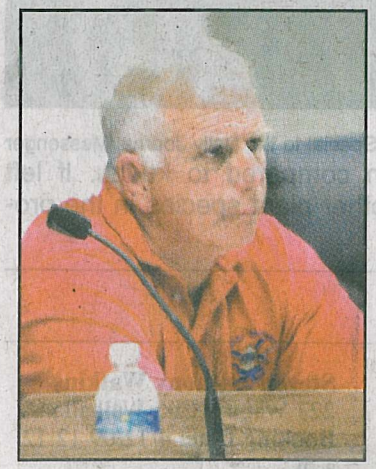
By CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Just 18 hours before he was to unveil the county's 2009-2010 budget and less than 21 months after being hired, Oconee County Administrator Dale Surrett has been fired.

Surrett was relieved of his duties late Tuesday night with all three new council members — Wayne McCall, Reg Dexter and Joel Thrift — voting for his ouster. Councilmen George Blanchard and Mario Suarez voted against the action, which came near midnight after a nearly five-hour Tuesday meeting that included two executive sessions.

A pale and somewhat shaken Surrett had no comment other than to say he would meet with a lawyer.

McCall, the District 2 councilman who represents Walhalla and surrounding areas, made the motion to terminate Surrett's contract after coming out of the second executive session. He later explained his reasons after the vote was taken and the few people in the audience remaining filed out.



Wayne McCall

"I've been getting too many calls from people because the administrator is not helping them," McCall said. "I'm losing $2,000 a week at my business answering these calls because it's all thrown back at me."

McCall added that departments are "running amok" and singled out Building Codes, which he said has been the target of many complaints.

"We ran on a platform of responsible government," McCall said.

His view was not shared by Blanchard, who called the action "insanity."

"I'm aghast, I can't believe I'm part of a group doing this," Blanchard said. "This action is wrong."

Blanchard also decried the group's selection of Council Clerk Elizabeth Hulze as interim administrator.

"How can she do the job she was hired to do and also be administrator just as we're beginning the budget process?" Blanchard asked.

Asked how she felt about taking the job, Hulze said she's a county employee and would do what she can



Jessica Nelms/Staff

The look on Oconee County administrator Dale Surrett's face early Tuesday evening foreshadowed his midnight firing by the Oconee County Council. Councilman George Blanchard, right, voted to retain Surrett, who lost his job on a 3-2 vote.

to help.

For his part, Suarez said the majority's decision lacked compassion.

"If you were in his shoes, would you be at peace with yourself?" he asked.

Dexter said he would begin immediately to search for a new administrator.

Surrett was the fourth administrator to serve Oconee County in as many years, having been hired in June 2007. Ron Rabun, the county's first hired administrator was fired, also after 21 months, in June 2006. Retired Finance Director Phyllis Lombard served as interim administrator until Planning Director Tom Hendricks was hired. He quit abruptly in spring 2007.

Last September, a Blanchard-chair council approved an extension of Surrett's contract through July 8, 2012. The agreement calls for Surrett to receive one-year of salary, approximately $105,000, if his services are terminated, as well as all accrued sick leave and vacation time. The county's is also obligated to pay his health insurance and that of his family, his life and disability insurance and any other available benefits for a period of 12 months.

Talk of Surrett's imminent ouster surfaced in late February when Blanchard leaked news to the media that Dexter and Thrift had been plotting Surrett's firing. At the time, Dexter characterized those reports as "conjecture."