Oconee closes in on Highway 11 deal

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee County officials took a second vote in favor of moving forward with the purchase of a 415-acre tract on Highway 11 despite concerns, including those of a councilman, that there are no concrete plans for how the property will be used.

The Oconee County Council also voted to give the BP Barber engineering firm a $12,800 change order to prepare a boundary survey on the property. All the preliminary engineering and environmental services are costing the county $60,150.

Barber is rushing to complete a set of preliminary surveys on the Highway 11 property as part of the county's due diligence before closing on the deal.

One taxpayer told Council during public comments that if any of them were to spend their own $2.5 million, which is what the property is expected to cost, "you would plan," he said.

At each vote taken related to the land deal, Councilman Wayne McCall voted no.

"I'm opposed because I don't see what the plan is," McCall said.

Council has scheduled public hearings on the proposal Oct. 19.

McCall and others point out that it would be difficult for the public to comment on something they have little information about and said Tuesday night's vote should have been put off until a plan is unveiled.

Councilman Paul Corbeil disagreed. He made the motion to approve second reading on the purchase, but left pending the date of the public hearings. He said the date of the hearing would depend on whether the public has had advance information on the plans.

Council Chairman Reg Dexter asked Administrator Scott Moulder whether a plan would be circulated for the benefit of the

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Scott Moulder
Oconee Administrator

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public before the Oct. 19 hearings.

Moulder said he was confident that it would be.

"We'll have a conceptual plan that'll be subject to change before it is finalized," Moulder said.

Dexter said at a workshop last month that he would hope to see people in favor of the land deal, who don't usually attend Council meetings, show up to speak in support of the sale at the public hearing. He said he was sure that those in opposition would make their voices heard.

A majority on Council is in favor of taking a portion of the 415 acres for a public recreational facility with nature trails, ball fields and other amenities. They hope such a setting would ultimately attract light industry for the remainder of the property that would be buffered from the recreational side.

Not voting on any issues related to the land purchase was Councilman Joel Thrift, who earlier recused himself on the matter due to a personal friendship with the current property owner.

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