Oconee council dumps tax hike

Thrift opposed, others uneasy with $400K rock

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Council finally asked Scott Moulder to present a plan to prevent a tax increase at Thursday's meeting of its budget committee, and the administrator came prepared.

Council's budget, finance and administration committee ultimately voted 3-1 — with Joel Thrift opposed — to advance that version to second reading of the fiscal year 2017 budget ordinance on May 17.

But councilman Reg Dexter gave the disclaimer that three of the four members present for the meeting had concerns about using a $400,000 transfer from the county rock quarry's budget to help eliminate the tax increase and noted the budget was still a work in progress.

Edda Cammick and Thrift also expressed reservations about straining the budget of the rock quarry, which already produced $500,000 in additional revenue for the county's general fund recently.

"I'm totally opposed to that," Thrift said. "We've got a good thing going right now. ... Let's just don't shoot the goose that laid the golden egg here."

from budget

quarry transfer

Wayne McCall was not present for the meeting. Chairman Paul Cain led the push for the balanced budget without a millage increase, asking Moulder midway through the meeting if it was possible.

Indicating he'd anticipated the request, Moulder produced just such a document, but gave a disclaimer of his own: "I can balance the budget without a tax increase this year but it's employing techniques that will continue to delay the inevitable."

After initially presenting a budget document Thursday that reduced a millage raise from 2.1 mills to 1.32 mills from his original proposed version, Moulder presented yet another version that further compensated for the $679,916 in revenue that the 1.32-mill increase would have generated.

Along with $400,000 in additional revenue from the rock quarry, the largest cuts came from reducing the administrator's contingency from $200,000 to $100,000 and using $66,000 from the solid waste department's fund balance for groundwater testing at the county landfill.

There were 15 other changes to the budget, each affecting it by $20,000 or less, that added up to equal the rest of the revenue needed to balance the budget.

The rock quarry transfer was the source of the most controversy. Cain asked if the $400,000 transfer would hurt operations, and Moulder said it would not — at least in the short term.

'Let's just don't sho goose that the golden here.'



Joel Thrift
Oconee County Council member

"The concern is you're hurting their long-term potential to buy equipment down the road or make a future property purchase ... but it does not hurt them this year from an operational standpoint or even next year," Moulder said.

The latest version of the budget also included the changes from an amended version proposed by Dexter and Cammick at the committee's previous meeting that reduced the need for a millage increase from 2.1 mills to 1.32 mills, while restoring 2.5 mills worth of bonding power for capital projects.

Also on Thursday, Moulder laid out a bonding proposal that included the $700,000 purchase of property for an agricultural center that was removed from the general fund budget.

Other projects funded in Moulder's bonding plan through the year 2019 were a new building for the Westminster magistrate's office ($500,000), a Tri-County Technical College Oconee campus ($6 million), TCTC Pendleton campus improvements ($6,750,000), 14 T-hangars at the county airport ($1 million) and library system upgrades ($350,000).

The ag center land purchase was still a sticking point for some council members, as Dexter argued the county should use property it already owns instead.

While Dexter said he supported the project in theory, he asked Moulder to approach Pattillo Industrial Real Estate about the possibility of revivi a land-swap deal at the Golden Corne Commerce Park in lieu of spending t $700,000.

Pattillo owns the 57 acres on U.S. Highway 123 that the county would purchase for the ag center, but a previ

'We've heard the public, and they tell us they can't afford a tax increase.'



Paul Cain
Oconee County Council chairman

agreement existed to swap the property for an equal amount of land at the GCCP, where Pattillo would develop a speculative building.

As for potentially giving the Foothills Heritage Fair land on the fringes of the GCCP the county already owns, Cain said representatives of the agricultural community told him it was important to be in the center of the county.

"Their attendance doubled when they moved from the Golden Corner Commerce Park back to the center of the county," Cain said.

"This is not just a fairground — this is a farm center," he added, noting that a weekly farmers market was thriving at its current location less than a mile from the Pattillo property.

As Thursday's meeting drew to a close, Moulder asked for more direction on what capital projects council wanted to fund, and Cain thanked him for coming prepared.

"From my standpoint, I appreciate you foreseeing us asking and really begging for a budget without a tax increase," Cain said. "Because we've heard the public, and they tell us they can't afford a tax increase."

"I figured I'd just save us a couple weeks and do it now," Moulder joked.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com