Oconee council to hear revised millage

Final reading on Pioneer, Courthouse Inn also on docket

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WALHALLA — After shooting down an increase in property taxes earlier this month, Oconee County Council could get the chance tonight to vote to lower them instead.

Auditor Ken Nix will present an updated recommendation to council at its scheduled meeting and said last week he will propose a decrease of approximately 2 mills after an amended assessment of Duke Energy property by the S.C. Department of Revenue (DOR).

The last time council convened Sept. 3, Nix proposed a millage of 216 total mills for tax year 2014, which would have been a 1-mill boost over 2013, when the county increased 2 mills.

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But council voted 4-1 against Nix's proposal — with chairman Joel Thrift the lone member to vote in favor of accepting the hike — and chose to hold millage status quo, citing school spending and Duke's uncertain future in the county as primary concerns.

"We have to be responsible, and if we keep inching it up one more mill, one more mill, one more mill — after a while we've put a heck of a burden on the taxpayers, the people that elected us, the people who are our bosses," councilman Wayne McCall said.

Last week Nix announced he had received notification from the DOR that Duke had made an error in York County, and that correction equated into an increase in Oconee County assessment. Thus, Duke's total assessment of $130 million for 2014 is down only $2.5 million — instead of $9.5 million — from the 2013 assessment.

On Sept. 3, Nix said without the net decrease of $9.5 million from last year in the Oconee Nuclear Station's assessment, the county could have decreased millage by 2 mills — or back to where it was before the 2-mill hike of 2013.

Among other items of note on the council agenda tonight is a public hearing and the third and final reading of an ordinance to donate 60 acres adjacent to the Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) near Fair Play to the Pioneer Rural Water District.

Previous references to the land have identified it as 70 acres; but after a survey and the inclusion of necessary easements, the land amounts to 60.59 acres, according to county documents.

The land would be donated to Pioneer to construct a $15 million facility to serve the southern portion of Oconee as a substitute for the originally planned purchase of county land inside the park.

Oconee had offered to sell 25 acres to Pioneer for $132,000, but the deal was never finalized and the agreement expired.

As part of the site-certification process to make GCCP a certified industrial park, the county received information from the S.C. Department of Commerce suggesting the presence of a water treatment facility would have a negative impact on the process.

Also on the agenda is a funding report from the developers of The Courthouse Inn, a proposed boutique hotel in downtown Walhalla.

Last month, Oconee Courthouse Ventures, LLC, was given until tonight's meeting to explore options with a new lender for the proposed hotel.

The original lease agreement expired in August, but at a meeting of the real estate, facilities and land management committee, one of the developers, local real estate agent John Powell, asked for an extension to work on new financing.

Powell said Friday he was waiting for word on a potential investor and did not know if he would ask for another extension with the county. He did not return a phone call from The Journal Monday.

At a council meeting last month, Thrift said he would like to see "definitive action" by tonight or the council should consider exploring new options.

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