Oconee council to resume

Moulder: Reassessment could result in 'zero change'

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WALHALLA — With Oconee County Council set to resume discussions on next year's budget, some residents and at least one council member believe those talks should turn away from a tax increase.

On April 14, county administrator Scott Moulder presented a proposed fiscal year 2017 budget that included a 2.1-mill tax increase — which council had formally requested by a 3-1 vote a week earlier — projected to be worth $1,081,500 in additional revenue.

District 2 Councilman Wayne McCall has consistently opposed the tax hike and told The Journal on Monday he believes the budget could be balanced without one.

"My phone has rung steady with all these people telling me, 'Please don't vote for a budget increase. We can't afford it,'" he said.

Council's budget, finance and administration committee will meet again at 5:30 p.m. today to continue its discussions on both the county's FY 2017 budget and the School District of Oconee County's.

McCall isn't the only one opposed to a tax hike. At least four Oconee residents spoke out against it at council's April 19 meeting, the first opportunity for public comment since Moulder's budget presentation.

West Union resident Charles "Bozo" Richards, a member of the county's planning commission, said Oconee's upcoming reassessment could already lead to an increase in most citizens' taxes without raising millage.

"Don't you think you ought to have some discussion with the administrator — some indication of where he thinks it's going to fall?" Richards asked. "Conceivably, with an increase in assessment, you could pick up two or three million dollars."

Mountain Rest resident Susie Cornelius said she

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agreed with Richards' comments.

"It's not OK to (raise taxes) when you don't know where the assessment's going and who it's going to effect. ... I want to ask y'all to sit and look at this budget, get Mr. Moulder's cooperation, y'all find the cuts somewhere," she said.

Reassessment is a two-year process whereby the re-evaluation of the county's real estate market takes place in the first year, and the implementation of those values takes place in the second, thus the tax bills affected don't come out until late in the second year.

Because Oconee opted last year to delay reassessment by a year, it wouldn't see the budget impacted with any additional revenues until 2018.

Moulder told The Journal on Monday it was not a certainty that any extra revenue would be generated, period.

"Actually what we're seeing is possibly a zero change to our real estate market — possibly even a small decrease," he said. "It's still early, and there are a lot of factors (involved), but there probably won't be a significant increase in our reassessment numbers anyway."

Other county residents opposed the tax increase, but did not mention reassessment. Jean Jennings of West Union suggested Oconee should sell one-fourth of its vehicle fleet and return the money to its general fund.

"Only county employees that absolutely need to drive county vehicles (should) be able to use them," she said. "We now have too many county employees — and some non-county employees — using them. This is wasting taxpayers' money."

Jennings also suggested Oconee should cease handing out tax incentives to attract industry, as well as sell off some of its real estate and "quit buying more."

"The county needs to get out of the real estate business," she said.

Mountain Rest resident John Morrey also said he hoped council would be able to increase the budget for the sheriff's office without increasing taxes, suggesting council look at ways to monetize the county's premium services for its more affluent taxpayers.

As for McCall, the District 2 councilman also questioned why the county continued to spend money when it could not afford the expenses.

"It's not our money — we can't just keep blowing it and blowing it," he said. "It's the taxpayers' money. The money that counts the most is not the money from the multi-million dollar houses — yes, they do pay more taxes — but the money that counts the most is from the ones living on a farm they inherited from their grandparents and they are trying to hang on to their land. Those dollars count a lot more than the dollars from the people who can afford it."

"They're retired from the cotton mill, their retirement fund's been raided, they've got basically Social Security — that's the money that counts.

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