Oconee eyes broadband deal with Seneca company

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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WALHALLA — County council will hear a measure tonight designed to let Oconee take a step back from the broadband business and recover what it has invested in the project.

An action item is on the agenda for today's 6 p.m. meeting asking council to approve a recommendation from county staff to allow One Tone Telecom of Seneca to lease and operate the county's 250-plus-mile fiber optic network for up to 20 years.

Council approval is also needed to allow county administrator Scott Moulder to negotiate the contract.

Moulder told The Journal on Monday the formal structure of the agreement is still to be determined, but the "initial design" is to hand over full management responsibility to One Tone — a telecommunications service provider — under a management lease.



Moulder

The company would be responsible for the complete operations of the broadband project, although the county would have "some oversight and technical assistance requirements."

Moulder said the agreement would mean the county would not need to maintain a department to manage the Fiber Optics Creating Unified Solutions project in its current status.

"We will need to maintain at least one person to serve as an oversight liaison and technical advisor about the system design and installation," he said. "We will also still be required to comply with all (National Telecommunications and Information Administration) grant provisions and reporting requirements. Therefore we will need to assign those duties to an existing staff member."

If and when Moulder negotiates the terms of the proposed contractual

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relationship, the complete contractual document would be brought back before council for final approval of the award.

The county initially sent requests for qualification to 81 firms, only three of which submitted proposals in January. An evaluation committee consisting of

FOCUS director Mike Powell, FOCUS project manager Kim Wilbanks, deputy director of community development Josh Stephens, IT director John Cox and GIS director Lisa Simmering reviewed and scored the proposals and recommended two firms — One Tone Telecom and WC Fiber of Abbeville — to continue to Phase 2.

After receiving new proposals from the two prequalified firms, the same group scored the proposals and recommended One Tone Telecom for the award.

The current FOCUS budget for fiscal year 2016 was approved at $2,278,241, while the FY 2015 audit showed a loss of approximately $500,000 last year.

"Financially, we need a long-term plan to recover what has been invested," Moulder said.

The county administrator said the agreement also reflected the county's desire to get out of the broadband business.

"We are limited to how we can operate the system due to the legal restrictions placed upon government-owned fiber systems," he said. "We need to find a private operator who can manage the system to its fullest."

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