Oconee faces tough decisions

Contract, purchase orders could leave a way out for county

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SENECA — An impasse between the state and an engineering firm is holding up Oconee County's $4.2 million runway extension project, according to sources knowledgeable about the situation.

Those sources have said that a permit, issued by the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to the firm of Talbert & Bright, is at the core of the delay.

Talbert & Bright was hired by the county to oversee the project, including obtaining necessary permits related to soil erosion and sedimentation.

On Tuesday, Airport Director Kevin Short deflected questions about the status of the project to County Administrator Scott Moulder.

Moulder said that the county would issue a news release, likely today, to address the airport situation.

The project has been on hold since the end of February when DHEC intervened to address a complaint of storm water run-off into Lake Hartwell near the runway project site.

The prolonged delay will force county officials to make some tough financial decisions in the weeks ahead.

A purchase order (PO)

on airport

dated October 2009 for more than $3.4 million awarded to Plateau Excavation, a Georgia contractor moving dirt for the runway extension, appears to require the company to complete the project by Aug. 7.

The PO contains a "Notice to Vendors" stating that "Oconee will pay no more than the total listed." The PO also states the county could cancel the entire order or a portion of it, if delivery is not made as specified.

A second PO provides Talbert & Bright payment not exceeding $644,085.

Even if DHEC immediately allowed the project to proceed, it would appear unlikely, if not impossible, for the work to be completed by the required date.

Plateau is seeking $600,000 from the county to reimburse its losses for having its equipment sit idly at the project site. The company has submitted other invoices.

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Moulder said he would not authorize any payments until the contractor and Talbert & Bright break down an accounting of legitimate expenses and expenses caused by the delay in the project.

In any case, the PO states Oconee is not bound to pay more than the total listed in the order.

A 2008 contract between the county and Talbert & Bright required the consultant to carry Commercial General Liability coverage for $1 million per claim.

The Journal on Tuesday asked Procurement Director Robyn Courtright and County Attorney Tom Martin whether the county would seek to cover the Plateau invoices as a liability claim.

Courtright said the county was not sure if the Commercial General Liability would apply because the county has separate POs with Plateau and Talbert & Bright.

The Journal left a voice message with Talbert & Bright principal Jay Talbert asking if the company would pay Plateau's invoices. There was no immediate response.

The Federal Aviation Administration is contributing $2.7 million to the project that would extend the runway from 4,400 feet to 5,000 feet. The project also carves out a parallel taxiway.

The runway's extension would allow larger planes to use the airport. The airport would potentially increase its revenues by selling fuel to these larger planes. Oconee currently loses that additional revenue to Anderson and Pickens counties, which have longer runways.

The original goal was to have the runway project completed by Sept. 4.

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