Oconee interviews broadband contractors

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WALHALLA — Oconee officials Tuesday tapped a Greer, S.C. company to install fiber optic cable for the first phase of the county's $14.3 million broadband project.

Members of an evaluation committee huddled late into the afternoon to score and select Network Controls & Electric over two other finalists.

The committee also set aside one hour to interview separately representatives of Edwards Communications of Columbia, S.C., and Spalj Construction of Loganville, Ga., before agreeing on the winning bid.

Network Controls & Electric submitted the lowest price at $5.44 per foot, said Oconee Procurement Director Robyn Courtright.

Pricing was 55 percent of the evaluation criteria used by the selection committee.

Oconee issued a request for proposals (RFP) on June 16 for a qualified contractor to provide fiber-optic cabling installation on the first 95-mile leg of the proposed 270-mile broadband network. Twelve companies responded to the RFP.

Based on the price per foot, Network Controls & Electric's contract tops $2.7 million.

Oconee previously awarded an $8.2 million contract to have a Georgia company install fiber-optic cabling for the entire project, but Southern Pipeline & Utility could not obtain a performance bond for the full amount of the project.

County Administrator Scott Moulder now wants to bid out the project in three phases.

The project is anchored by a $9.6 million federal grant.

When completed, the county's broadband network would establish a middle-mile network that could be made available to Internet Service Providers for a fee.

The network could open the way for broadband services in rural areas where private companies don't go because they see little return on big investments.

Supporters embrace the project as a golden opportunity to boost educational opportunities, upgrade health, safety and emergency services, and stimulate economic development.

However, detractors think the county will be incurring more expenses than profit in the venture.

The selection committee will recommend a contract be awarded to the winning bid at a special council meeting Monday.

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