Oconee nears private partnership for broadband project

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
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WALHALLA — County staff expects to propose a partnership with private industry to take over Oconee's broadband project to council at its second meeting in April.

Oconee's Fiber Optics Creating Unified Solutions (FOCUS) project operated at an approximately $500,000 net loss last year.

County administrator Scott Moulder said this week that though the proposal would come before council in April, there would still be significant details to iron out that would delay the actual start of the partnership.


Moulder

"We've still got to go through some of the contract negotiations and set up the relationship," he told council's budget, finance and administration committee. "Now we have contracts that have already been developed and prepared, so it should be a little quicker. But the attorneys are then going to get involved in that process — so it's going to delay it some."

Moulder admitted he was unsure of the financial impact of the partnership and said he was "not at liberty" to discuss many of the details publicly yet.

"The recommendation will include the financial partnership, so (council) will have that information, as well," he said. "So hopefully by the end of this budget year, we will have a direction on how to get rid of that."

Councilman Wayne McCall said the FOCUS project was "a bad investment" that is "coming back to bite us."

Chairman Paul Cain said he tended to agree, but said the county could not afford to dwell on the past.

"We've got to look for how we're going to move forward positively," he said, "and hopefully we will be able to transfer some of that responsibility to a private entity so that we're not taking a hit every year in that part of the budget."

Councilman Joel Thrift pointed out that while the project has had its challenges, it has also had "a lot of benefits."

"Don't leave that part out," he said. "We have connectivity with our public safety, our schools, which benefits everybody. We just got caught up in the last mile of the thing and people refusing to run it, and we've had to subsidize that.

"But it has benefited many of our citizens, especially in the rural areas."

Moulder said the proposal that would be brought before council would include "the capabilities of paying back the monies that we've had to actually put into it" over a five- to 10-year period.

Moulder told The Journal on Thursday he couldn't elaborate on the arrangements submitted with the proposals because he is not a member of the evaluation committee and won't have any information about the proposals until after the interviews.

"The committee will then report their findings to me before it goes to council for approval," he said.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6128