Oconee re-bids broadband project

County Council to award contract at Aug. 8 special meeting

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Oconee officials will be on a tight schedule to evaluate and score proposals submitted by companies interested in the first phase of the county's broadband project so that County Council could approve a winning bid in a special meeting Aug. 8.

Procurement Director Robyn Courtright outlined the tight schedule after advertising a request for proposals (RFP) on the on the project Thursday.



FILE PHOTO

Oconee County issued a new request for proposals Thursday on the first phase of its broadband project.

The latest RFP could very well be the last opportunity for Oconee to get the $14.3 million project back on track after several serious missteps.

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Courtright said the RFP is for phase 1 of the project, which is approximately 95 miles of the proposed 270-mile route.

The company chosen for the job would be called on to bore underground along the initial segment of the route to install the casing for the fiber optic cabling.

"There is no way to predict how many proposals we will receive," Courtright said.

Council voted to re-bid the fiber optic cabling project in phases last month after the company it chose to do the entire work failed to secure 100 percent performance bonding for the contract worth almost $8.2 million.

County Administrator Scott Moulder initially veered from county policy by requiring 50 percent bonding from Southern Pipeline & Utility. Moulder later changed his mind and told SPU to come up with a 100 percent performance bond.

Council waited weeks for SPU to secure the bond, before it finally voted to re-bid the project during a May 17 meeting.

Courtright said SPU was chosen out of nine companies that submitted proposals during the first RFP advertised in January. She expects as many to bid, if not more, because the work is being done in phases.

"Right now I have 74 vendors on our bidders' list," Courtright said.

Vendors have until June 30 to ask questions about the RFP. Bids will be opened July 14, which would give members of he evaluating committee 16 business days to evaluate, score and recommend a winning bid before the Aug. 8 council meeting.

The RFP stipulates that the deadline for the first phase f the project is Feb. 15, 2012. The entire project must be completed by Aug. 18, 2013 to comply with the requirements of the federal grant.

Oconee County is admittedly way behind schedule on the project that is being funded largely by a $9.6 million federal grant awarded last year.

In reporting on the project's progress to the national Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), Oconee blames SPU's failure to get a performance bond, as well as the county having to fight state legislation that would have over-regulated the broadband network.

Although the legislation passed in the House, the Senate was unable to finish work on it, and likely won't take it up this year with lawmakers focusing on the budget.

Some county officials think the legislation could be dead.

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