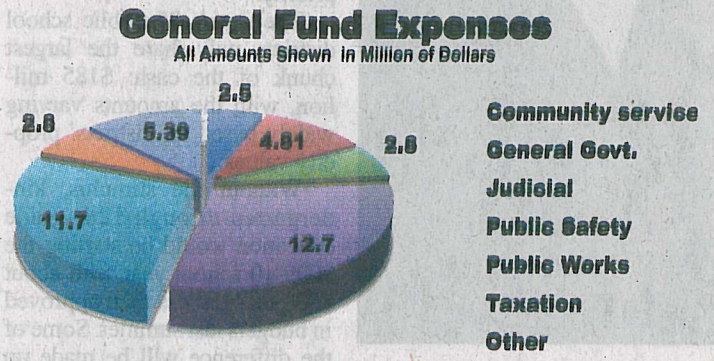
Oconee residents get to speak up on budget

Tuesday hearings will focus on $42.6 million spending plan



By CARLOS GALARZA
carlos@dailyjm.com

WALHALLA — Oconee County taxpayers get the opportunity Tuesday to sound off on a proposed $42.6 million budget for fiscal 2009-10 that begins July 1.

As required by law, the Oconee County Council will get feedback from residents beginning at 6 p.m. at Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St. in Walhalla.

The budget represents a modest 1.2 percent increase from the current $42.1 million spending plan.

Council members made it clear from the start of the budget workshop process in March that they did not want any new taxes. They took it a step further by also killing a $25 per vehicle road maintenance fee that would have brought in about $1.3 million in revenues to the county kitty.

In arguing against the fee, Council Chairman Reg Dexter characterized it as a not too cleverly disguised back-door tax.

Getting to this point with the budget has been an achievement of sorts given the unusual circumstances surrounding the process.

On April 14, the County Council fired Administrator Dale Surrett and a week later Councilman George Blanchard, who chaired the Budget, Finance & Administration Committee, resigned.

That placed the burden on Interim Administrator Kendra Brown, who came aboard just a few months earlier to take on the job of Assistant Administrator and Finance Director. It also left a new and untested trio of councilmen — Dexter, Wayne McCall and Joel Thrift, along with hold-over Councilman Mario Suarez — to call the shots.

See BUDGET, Page 7A

BUDGET

Continued from Page 1A

Early in the game, department heads were told this would be a very tight budget year because of the ongoing recessionary economic downward spiral. In the end, they were asked to squeeze the belt tighter.

spending, which takes in the Oconee County Public Library and Parks Administration, was shaved almost 3 percent from $2.57 million to $2.5 million.

However, the cost of keeping residents safe increased by almost five percent. Public Safety, which includes the Sheriff's Office, the Detention Center, 911 Communications and Animal Control, saw its

"What impresses me was that they were willing to go below the administrator's recommendation."

McCall said he'd wished council had been even more frugal. For instance, he was against funding $6,200 for the Zoning Office, which he called the making of a new bureaucracy.

"If I had my way about it, I'd pare (the budget) down

the amending of the current budget to help finance the purchase of fire trucks.

Councilman Thrift said he feels comfortable going into Tuesday's public hearings on the budget knowing that many public meetings were held to get to this point.

"I feel comfortable with what we've done," Thrift said. "We all participated the best

fate of a sewer project at the proposed Golden Corner Industrial Park on Highway 59 in Fair Play. Following the public hearing on the budget, council will hold a workshop with the Oconee County Economic Development Commission to discuss the proposed industrial park, a new spec building and other issues.

McCall said he would like to see council prioritize those

big-ticket items. He said that aside from the jail expansion and courthouse improvements, everything else could wait until the economy turns around.

One thing the entire council is in agreement on is in recognizing the work Brown and her Finance Department have put into the budget.

"(Brown) made it easy for us and the public to understand this budget," Dexter said.