Oconee targets airport expansion

County in process of negotiating land deals

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee County Regional Airport is poised to move forward with the acquisition of properties needed for expansion and other improvements, if federal funding is available.

County Administrator Scott Moulder is recommending almost $600,000 (in federal funds) in the 2013 budget for airport-related capital projects, including the purchase of an 11-acre tract south of Airport Road. The county has coveted the property for expansion at the airport for many years. However, the asset was frozen for more than eight years because it was part of land seized during a prominent drug case in the county.

Moulder said Thursday that federal funding would be required.

"No purchases would be made unless we are assured that federal funding will be available," Moulder said.

Airport Director Kevin Short said the county is taking the necessary preliminary steps required by the Federal Aviation Administration to move ahead with two land deals.

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FILE PHOTO

Oconee County is negotiating land deals to improve and expand the local airport. Airport projects would be contingent on federal funds being available.

AIRPORT: 11-acre tract key for growth

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"We're in the process of working with two landowners," Short said. "We're doing title searches and surveys."

The county is budgeting $100,000 for airport aviation easements, and $120,000 for airport obstruction clearing.

"Some vegetative trees are in homeowners' properties," Short said. "We're in the preliminary stages of identifying the parcels."

Short said that because obstruction clearing is a safety issue, it is considered a priority for the FAA.

"It's allowing us to work on land acquisition," Short added.

Moulder said negotiations on the properties are ongoing.

The 11-acre tract is a key piece for the airport's future expansion. Short said the additional land would allow for 30 T-hangars and six corporate hangars, as well as aircraft ramp space.

The 11-acre property is registered in the name of Richard M. Sepler, a Miami lawyer who is a trustee of the William R. Burkhart Trust.

Burkhart was a focal figure in the landmark Oconee County drug case.

Federal prosecutors accused Burkhart of generating "substantial sums of cash" from his illegal drug trade, and used some of the proceeds to buy a "significant amount" of property in Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties.

Short said that under new federal guidelines, the FAA picks up 90 percent of the cost of aviation projects. The Feds used to pick up 95 percent of the costs. State and local funds pay the remaining share.

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