Oconee tax hike back on

Cain, Dexter, Thrift vote in favor of millage increase

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — After voting against a tax increase at its last meeting, Oconee County Council's budget committee reversed course Tuesday and approved a version of the fiscal year 2017 budget that includes a 1.5-mill increase.

The committee voted 3-1 in favor of advancing the latest version of the budget to a public hearing ahead of third and final reading of the ordinance to establish it next month.

Flipping their votes from the previous committee meeting were District 5 member Reg Dexter — who had stipulated he only voted in favor because the budget was a work in progress — and council chairman Paul Cain, who himself requested the version without a tax increase at the previous meeting.

"I don't want to raise taxes," Cain said Tuesday, "but I'm not here to get re-elected, I'm here to do the job."

District 4 rep Joel Thrift has consistently been a proponent of a tax hike, suggesting at the beginning of the budget process "at least" a three-mill increase was needed, and he also voted in favor.

FOR MORE

To read a related editorial, turn to page **A4**.

With Edda Cammick not in attendance, District 2 councilman Wayne McCall was the lone vote in opposition to the millage increase.

"This is absolutely insane," McCall said after the final vote.

McCall was also the only dissenter as the committee accepted a bonding proposal by county administrator Scott Moulder to fund more than $15 million in capital projects through 2019.

The projects included in Moulder's plan are a property purchase for an agricultural center in the county ($700,000), a new building for the Westminster magistrate's office ($500,000), a Tri-County Technical College Oconee campus ($6 million), TCTC Pendleton campus

SEE **HIKE**, PAGE **A5**

HIKE: Dexter first to argue for tax increase

FROM PAGE A1

improvements ($6,750,000), 14 T-hangars at the county airport ($1 million) and library system upgrades ($350,000).

The budget vote Tuesday essentially reverted to a previous version that included a 1.32-mill increase, but Cain further motioned to add two items that were removed within that version — his motion restored the county's clerk of court to a full-time position from a part-time one (at a cost of $14,564) and restored one of two shared planning positions that were included in Moulder's original presentation ($56,972).

Those in favor of the tax increase made the case that they were only avoiding what would be an even larger hike in the next cycle, as Moulder said a balanced budget next year would require a total of 4.32 mills over the two-year period without additional cuts.

Moulder said the county had added almost $2 million in expenses from its FY 2016 budget without adding any revenue.

For citizens, the 1.5-mill increase would mean an additional $6 in property taxes on a primary residence valued at $100,000.

Dexter opened the arguments in favor of the tax increase, calling the version of the budget that did not include one — thanks in large part to redirecting $400,000 in revenue from the county's rock quarry — "a disaster."

"Taking $400,000 from the rock quarry is just not smart management of our funds," he said.

Dexter was also the first to make the argument that the county was approximately five mills shy of having its revenue match its expenditures.

"This just makes sense to anyone who deals with a household budget. ... As long as my revenue is better than my expenditures, I have a smile on my face," he said. "As soon as that goes the other way, I've got a problem. ... It's not good management to keep on postponing the inevitable."

McCall said the county needed to focus on getting spending under control before it raised taxes.

"We're responsible for the taxpayers' money," he said. "We don't have any money. As a county government, we need to hold off and say, 'We're going to dig our heels in until after reassessment and we see what the priorities are.'

"We need to say we're going to run it like a business," he added. "If I ran my business this way, we'd have been bankrupt years ago."

Thrift said he agreed with Dexter. He said county government differed from private business because the goal was not to make a profit.

"We've got to do what's necessary from a revenue standpoint to cover the bases," he said.

In terms of revenue, Moulder said that based on early numbers from reassessment, the county would see residential home values stay the same, if not decrease slightly. But he also said the value of a county mill is on the rise based on securing economic development projects.

With no hospitality tax, Cain argued the county had, for all intents and purposes, the lowest taxes in the state.

"We have cut and cut and cut ... and we continue to spend the taxpayers' money very wisely and very efficiently," he said.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com