Oconee tops like-sized

Ballooning property assessments make Oconee one of the wealthiest counties in the state

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WALHALLA — Oconee government milks more taxes from residents and businesses — sometimes two and up to three times more per capita — than other counties comparable in size, statistics from the South Carolina Association of Counties show.

The per capita assessed property value in Oconee in 2007 was $6,904.

That is far more than is assessed per capita in Greenwood ($3,940), Lancaster ($4,021) and Laurens ($2,334), which are counties comparable in size and population to Oconee.

Property assessments are part of the equation used by county auditors in setting millage or property tax rates. Calculation of the millage is based on approved budget divided by the tax base.

Despite being comparable

counties in taxes

in geographic size and population, Oconee's fiscal 2009 General Fund Budget ($42.1 million) dwarfs Greenwood's ($22 million), Lancaster's ($31.3 million) and Laurens' ($16.5 million), according to data compiled by the SCAC.

Tax bills will begin going out in early October.

Oconee Auditor Ken Nix said this week that the 2009 assessed property value used in calculating millage tops $481 million or an increase of 5.2 percent from 2007 assessed value of $457.1 million.

New construction, such as the HighPointe apartments that cater to Clemson University students on the grounds of the

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former West Point Stevens plant, and high-end home construction around the lakes, particularly the multi-million dollar homes built in The Cliffs Communities, drives the increase in assessments despite the recession.

Add taxes paid by Fortune 500 company Duke Energy, which usually pays in excess of $20 million annually, and it's easy to see why Oconee ranks as one of the wealthiest counties in South Carolina.

Oconee topped $47.2 million in total revenues in 2007 compared to Greenwood ($32.2 million), Lancaster ($47.3 million) and Laurens ($26.4 million). Unlike Oconee, each of the other three counties has a 1 percent local option sales tax for revenues that could only be used for specific capital projects.

By law, the local option sales tax sunsets once necessary funds are raised to complete designated capital projects.

Oconee County voters rejected an attempt to introduce a local option sales tax in 2006. Elected officials appear to have little appetite to revisit the issue with voters.

The 2006 reassessment of property in Oconee, which comes around every five years, is one reason voters revolted against the sales tax proposal. Property owners flooded the Assessor's Office with appeals to the assessed value of their homes that in some cases are still being heard.

Claims by Oconee County Treasurer Greg Nowell that taxpayers are being overtaxed, an assertion he recently renewed, have only added to the public's distrust of how the county's finances are being handled.

Almost to a man, Oconee County councilmen maintain that taxpayers are being billed correctly and that the problem is one of under-spending and not over-collecting.

That appears to be borne out by SCAC statistics for fiscal 2007 in which Oconee's total expenditures were $39.7 million, or $7.5 million less than revenues.

Greenwood County also spent $8 million less than was brought in revenues in 2007. However, Lancaster spent $11 million more than they took in, while Laurens over-spent by $9.5 million.