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Oconee unveils $45.1 million budget

Spending plan does not include any millage increase

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WALHALLA — Finance Department officials presented to the Oconee County Council on Wednesday a $45.1 million spending plan as recommended by ousted County Administrator Dale Surrett.

The proposed 2009-10 budget that councilmen saw for the first time does not include any millage rate increase.

Only a handful of onlookers showed up for the annual presentation of the county's budget despite the mounting drama over Surrett's ouster the night before.

Finance Director and Assistant Administrator Kendra Brown took the seat at the table facing the council that had been reserved for Surrett to unveil the budget he helped prepare.

"This is unexpected," Brown said. "I didn't expect to be presenting the budget. If I'm a little disorganized, please forgive me."

The recommended $45.1 million spending plan represents an increase of almost 7 percent over the current adopted budget of $42.1 million. However, it is more frugal than the $56.1 million requested by department heads and elected officials to operate their offices.

In presenting an overview of the budget, Brown said revenues increased to $46.4 million because of an increase in the value of a mill and projected revenue of $1.5 million generated by an additional fee of $25 per vehicle.

However, the additional revenue is scaled down by projected state cuts expected to run from $400,000 to $1.6 million. Brown said it was decided to project the cuts in the middle of the two extremes, or $900,000.

"It may be worse in the 2011 budget," Brown said. "We spent a lot of time working with department heads to get (the budget) to the bare bones."

Public Safety received the deepest cuts to wish lists — $5.1 million worth — from $18,701,031 requested to $13,563,059 recommended. Still, that is $1.4 million more than the $12.1 million assigned to Public Safety in the current adopted budget.

Within Public Safety, the Emergency Services Department took the biggest hit, from $5.5 million requested to $2.5 million recommended.

Councilman Wayne McCall said that an additional $400,000 might be trimmed off Emergency Services from a reorganization plan being worked on that includes splitting Fire and Rescue.

Budget Committee Chairman George Blanchard reiterated that this would be the toughest budget for the county in about 20 years. Blanchard said he had asked Surrett, before he was terminated, to prepare a budget based on a conservative estimate of state funding.

"Although the economy appears to be improving, we're going to lag," Blanchard said of the county's finances.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Oconne Finance Director Kendra Brown unexpectedly filled in for ousted Administrator Dale Surrett to unveil the new 2009-10 county budget on Wednesday.