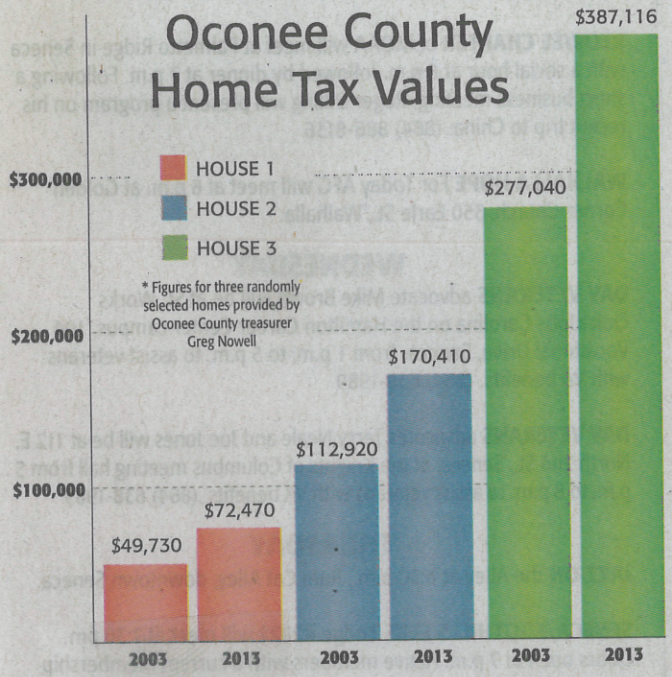
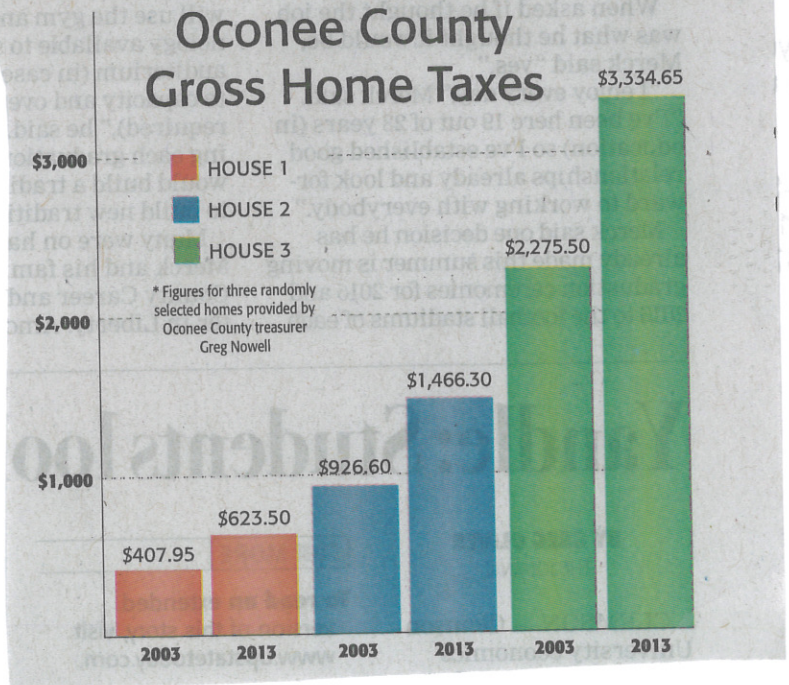
Property tax money rises 74 percent since '03





BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

While Oconee County's tax millage rose less than six mils from 2003 to 2013, the money generated from property taxes for all county government expenditures rose nearly 74 percent, or more than $15.6 million.

County administrator Scott Moulder said 70-75 percent of the total county budget each year comes from property taxes.

The county did have a two-mil tax increase last year to cover the cost of starting a road maintenance fund, but the proposed budget for the 2014-15 fiscal year has now passed two readings of County Council and does not include a tax increase. A public hearing on that budget is set for 6 p.m. Tuesday at the county offices on Pine Street in Walhalla. Final approval of the budget is scheduled for June 17.

The value of a mil is set each fall by the county auditor.

From 2003-11, the value of a mil rose 63.7 percent, from $311,136 in 2003 to $509,276 in 2011, according to county auditor Ken Nix. The effects of the recession, combined with a $10 million drop

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in the value of the Oconee Nuclear Station, actually caused the value of a mil to drop by 2.4 percent from 2011 to 2012 for the only time in the 11-year period, to $496,637. That number has remained stagnant since, jumping a little more than $1,000 in value last year, according to Nix's records.

The value of a mil, which determines property taxes, is based on the value of homes, and that number has increased through the years.

When Berry Nichols moved into his Walhalla home in 1980, he said he paid $280 in property taxes with no exemptions.

By 2003, the gross taxes on his property had climbed to $973.75. He did not have to pay that amount because of more than $600 in state exemptions and tax relief that brought his actual tax bill down to $330. Ten years later, Nichols' gross tax bill was $1,515, and the amount he paid after state exemptions was $524.50.

Oconee County treasurer Greg Nowell said the county is reimbursed for the state exemptions allowed for taxpayers, so the county does receive the total amount of the property tax due. Those exemptions have included the homestead exemption, school tax credits and the former state tax relief credit.

At The Journal's request, Nowell examined three homes in the county at different levels of value. Since the county is reimbursed for exemptions from the state, The Journal is using the gross tax for each home rather than the net tax after exemptions. In the survey, the three homes saw increases in the gross tax bill from 2003-13 of 55.5 percent, 58.2 percent and 46.5 percent, respectively.

One home showed a rise in value of 45.7 percent, from $49,730 in 2003 to $72,470 in 2013, with the gross tax increasing from $407.95 to 634.50.

The second house saw an increase in value of 50.9 percent, from $112,920 in 2003 to $170,410 in 2013, with the gross tax bill rising from $926.60 to $1,466.30 over the same period.

In the third home, the value rose 39.7 percent, from $277,040 to 387,116, with the gross tax bill increasing from $2,275.50 to $3,334.65.

Oconee County Council chairman Joel Thrift said the 2003-13 time period included two mandated reassessments of properties, which contributed to the increase in value. He said the county hopes continued emphasis on industrial growth will reduce the property tax burden for residential homeowners.

"Our whole goal is growing the industrial base, then you increase the value of the millage and you can lower the millage and keep that low," Thrift said.

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