Tax proposal heads to voters

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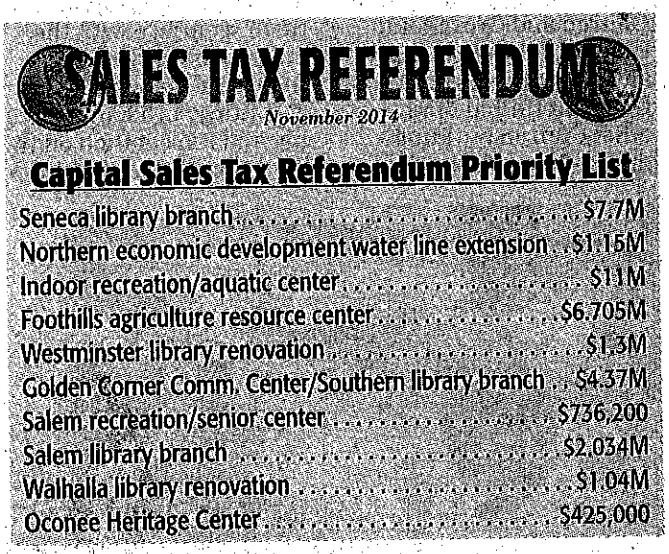
WALHALLA — After more than a year of discussion, the fate of a proposed 1 percent sales tax referendum to fund more than $36 million in capital projects is now officially in the hands of Oconee County voters.

County council unanimously approved final reading of an ordinance Tuesday night that will put the sales tax question to the voters in the form of a referendum in the Nov. 4 general election.

If approved in November, the referendum would increase the sales tax in the county from 6 to 7 cents per dollar for up to eight years. Proceeds from the additional 1 percent sales tax would go to fund an estimated $36.5 million for capital building projects submitted to the council in April by the Capital Sales Tax Commission.

Council chair Joel Thrift said this week the idea behind the increase

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is to raise the necessary funds for the projects without raising property taxes.

"(Property taxes are) our only source of revenue for the county, therefore this gives the people an opportunity ... to raise the money necessary to accomplish projects that will carry us into the long-term future and serve the needs of many of the citizens of Oconee County," he said.

Officials from the S.C. Department of Revenue have estimated that the additional sales tax would generate about $41 million in the county over eight years, according to county administrator Scott Moulder.

Moulder has said that amount would pay for the projects and allow the county to use bonds to begin several of the projects early. The county can use sales tax money to pay for bonding as long as that information is included in the referendum ballot.

The council also adopted a priority list earlier this year that will tell voters in what order the projects would be completed in the event that not enough money was raised in eight years to pay for all projects.

Libraries make up the largest portion of the project list, with new branches proposed in Seneca, Salem and the Fair Play area. The branches in Seneca and Salem would replace current buildings, while the Fair Play branch, which would be included with a Golden Corner Community Center, would be a new branch. The project list also calls for renovations and expansions at library branches in Walhalla and Westminster.

An $11 million indoor recreation and aquatic center is the largest single project on the list. The center would likely be run by the Foothills Area YMCA and would be built on a 22-acre tract of land Oconee Medical Center agreed last year to turn over to the county for such a facility.

Other projects on the list include $6.7 million for a Foothills Agricultural Resource and Marketing Center to promote agribusiness in the county, $1.15 million for a water line extension for economic development in the northern part of the county near Salem and $425,000 for renovations at three sites of the Oconee Heritage Center.

The referendum is the second question County Council has authorized for the Nov. 4 ballot. The council approved an ordinance earlier this year giving voters the choice on whether to allow Sunday alcohol sales countywide. Currently, the City of Seneca is the only place in the county where Sunday alcohol sales are legal. Clemson and Pendleton have similar referendums on their ballots for the Nov. 4 general election.

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