

County council seeking tax hike

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Oconee County Council appears headed for a 2.08-mill tax increase in the 2018-19 fiscal year budget.

Last week, the council's budget, finance and administration committee, which includes all five council members, approved \$1,125,000 in additional expenditures — equal to 1.38 mills. The vote, which was 4-0 with Wayne McCall abstaining, would still need to be approved by council as part of second reading of the budget on June 5.

The council approved first reading of the budget ordinance in title only at its meeting May 15 that included a 0.7-mill tax increase — \$378,000 — to pay for six new school resource officers and a deputy coroner requested by Coroner Karl Addis.

Interim county administrator Rick Martin said the recommended county budget already includes \$323,000 for pay increases for county employees, \$60,000 for another school resource officer, \$250,000 for three additional sheriff's deputies and \$300,000 for five more county firefighters.

Additions to the budget at last week's meeting included:

- \$500,000 for a new magistrate building in Westminster. This was listed as a top priority of council after its strategic planning retreat in February. Martin said the building will be paid for "under bonded debt," requiring a \$125,000 payment in FY

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'19, equaling a 0.21-mill increase.

- \$350,000 for a fire truck, which would give the county two new fire trucks this year.

- \$275,000 to renovate restrooms at High Falls County Park to bring the restrooms into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Funds have already been identified by the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department to do a similar upgrade at Chau Ram County Park. PRT director Phil Shirley told the committee last week if the proposal is included in the budget, he plans to bid out the projects at Chau Ram and High Falls in the fall.

Former county administrator Scott Moulder had said when he presented his budget in April that a \$1.7 million surplus is

projected in the current budget. After that first budget presentation, Moulder was directed to earmark \$114,000 from that surplus for a corridor study and a mandated rewrite of the county's comprehensive plan, both of which were requested by the county planning commission during a joint meeting with council in March.

Martin said the actual amount of the surplus will not be known until after the current budget year ends June 30, but that the money for the corridor study and comprehensive plan will be funded from the surplus.

The budget, finance and administration will meet again tonight at 6 p.m. at the county administration offices, located at 415 S. Pine St. in Walhalla.

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