

Alexander says available state money more

Credit rating, teacher pay, tourism, broadband top budget priorities

BY NORM CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

COLUMBIA — While state legislators aren't returning to the General Assembly next

week with as much available new revenue as they had a year ago, an Oconee lawmaker said the numbers are encouraging in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's certainly better than I thought it was going to be," Sen. Thomas Alexander of Walhalla said after revenue projections were presented during an annual meeting with media on Thursday. "I'm very pleased where we are financially,"

State budget estimates presented during Thursday's meeting projected nearly \$1.2 billion in new money available this year. Of that, about \$182 million

is recurring new revenue that will be available in future years, and \$988 million is money that will be available this year only.

That amount is down significantly from forecasts at the same meeting in January 2020, when the state projected \$1.88 billion in new



Alexander

than expected

money, including \$1.019 billion in one-time funds, and another \$863 million in new money that was expected to be in the state's coffers every year.

Alexander, who was one of five state legislators on the panel for Thursday's meeting, said the General Assembly's decision last year to operate on a continuing resolution for

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the 2020-21 budget because of the uncertainties of how the pandemic would impact state finances helped keep expenditures stable in the budget.

"I think we were right to step back and hit the pause button with the continuing resolution and see the revenues were going to come in," he said. "Folks were envisioning we would have a deficit by June 30 (2020). I think the influx of money through the feds kept things

propped up. They understood they needed to do something on the front end. One of the reasons revenue is as stable as it is is we didn't appropriate for use in this year's budget until we could wait and see where we are."

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Thomas Alexander
State senator

Alexander added that he is encouraged that state officials reported that sales tax revenue is up this year and "income taxes are holding their own."

"That gives us very strong indicators of how the economy is performing," he said. "I'm glad that we're in a much better spot than lots of other states around the country are."

PRIORITIES: CREDIT RATING, TEACHER PAY, BROADBAND, TOURISM

Alexander said he would like to see about \$300 million to \$500 million of the new non-recurring funds kept in a reserve account for needs that come up during the year and to help protect the state's credit rating. "I think it would be critical to have that reserve account available to address midyear cuts to state agencies," he said. "We also need to make sure we main-

tain our AAA credit rating."

With limited one-time money, Alexander said he would prioritize expanding broadband availability in rural areas.

"As chairman of the (Senate) Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee, I believe the broadband aspect is critical to the future of our businesses and industries, and economic development, especially in some of our rural counties," he said.

He added he hopes salary and step increases for teachers will be another priority, adding he would also like to see teachers get the step increase that wasn't included this year because of the continuing resolution.

Alexander listed tourism as another priority, calling it "a tremendous driver in our economy across South Carolina." With people still not willing to fly because of the pandemic, he said the state could benefit from tourism increases from the local region.

"We're going to find ourselves with the opportunity in South Carolina as we come out of this to be successful creating additional jobs and revenue," he said.