

## WALHALLA

# Upgrades for Oconee?

## County receives study on \$5M annex building, enhancements

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WALHALLA — Oconee County officials are mulling over a recent infrastructure feasibility study that projected it would cost \$5 million to renovate the Walhalla administrative building, construct an annex building and shore up concerns about protecting voting ballots.

The price tag also includes replacing a 15-year-old roof on the Oconee County Law Enforcement Center that is "severely degraded, with horizon-

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for voting," the feasibility report said. "Ballot security is also an important concern with ballots being stored, due to lack of space, in the open hallway of the administration building. State legislation that is currently being proposed could demand more secure facilities for voting locations, processes and equipment."

"It's imperative the county looks at how that is corrected going forward," Wilson said.

Councilman Julian Davis said the current set-up "has been a problem ever since I've been on council."

"This is what our voting hall looks like every single election," Davis said. "It's not anything new."

Securing future ballots and elections is included in the proposed annex building.

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# UPGRADES: Factor in new and emerging infrastructure

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tal splits and broken and missing shingles," according to the Johnson Controls feasibility report presented to county council on July 23.

"Oconee County is a thriving region of a thriving state. The secret about the beauty and lifestyle of the 'land beside the water' is not a well-kept secret any longer," the report reads. "With such growth, the county must factor in new and emerging infrastructure challenges that require resilient and secure spaces for employees, its council and committees, constituency voting and other critical local government services."

Johnson Controls and the county have a history together, with an ongoing \$3.4 million energy savings project that projects to

bring in \$253,000 in annual savings.

The study, which didn't cost any money, was first signed off by the Real Estate, Facilities and Land Management Committee last October. No action was taken at the meeting, with county administrator Amanda Brock telling The Journal earlier this week, "There are details that would have to be dug down into," before any decisions are made on the study. The three projects do include several objectives and strategies from the 2020 comprehensive plan and Johnson Controls listed multiple grant, rebate and incentive opportunities to be explored for any work.

## DETAILS

The administrative building is a repurposed elementary school built more than 60 years ago.

The report from Johnson Controls said the current facility has "inefficient space utilization, marginal office environments and a confounding arrangement of long and circuitous hallways paralleling hidden sub-hallways." Providing tighter security and funneling visitors through a main entrance would also be a priority, according to the report.

"There's lots of points of entries, there's lots of access points," Johnson Controls senior official Mike Wilson told council. "There's certainly some safety issues in how you get in and out of this building."

Another top priority for an annex building is to upgrade the size of council chambers to be able to hold 400 people, up from 170, after "council meetings at various times in 2021 saw maxed-out capacity of citi-

zens attending," the report said.

The proposed annex building would be between 12,000-13,500 square feet, according to the report. It would also be built behind the existing 415 Pine St. building.

## SECURE ELECTIONS

Back in October, Brock subtly said if there was no pandemic in 2020, the elections held in the county's Pine Street campus would not have been certified. That comment came because of voting equipment and ballots openly exposed throughout the administration building.

In what could arguably be the most significant recommendation in the Johnson Controls report, representatives called on the county to focus on ballot security.

"Currently, the building does not have proper space