

Referendum on roads?

**Council talks potential
penny tax on roads,
\$1M recreation grant
in strategic retreat**

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Potential initiatives incorporated into Oconee County's next budget may include a \$1 million grant to a local recreation department and more money for roads.

Councilman John Elliott even brought up other counties holding referendums to let the voters decide "if, in fact, they want to put the money where their mouth is when it comes to fixing the local roads," with the hedge he was "not saying I'm a proponent of this."

"So many people complain about the roads — a lot of them are state roads, but a lot of them are county roads, too," he said. "If the voters decide they want to do that, then terrific. I think we ought to let the voters decide. Do you want to put your money where your mouth is? Everybody wants to complain about it, but maybe we don't want to pay for it."

"We could put a billion dollars in road funding and it not be enough," Councilman Julian Davis said. "The impact has to be shown immediately (if taxes or fees were to be imposed). ... We don't need, in my opinion based on what the forecast is, to tax anymore because of what's coming down and we're doing a good job and it's a good time to live here."



Elliott

Brock said a penny sales tax referendum could be brought to council and Elliott noted it would need to be held during the 2024 presidential election. Davis went on to say a penny sales tax referendum would have to list a prioritized set of projects and "it honestly would not be the priorities of council" and that of a committee formed by cities.

In May, The Journal reported there were 660 miles of road the county maintained, with 502 miles being paved and 158 miles of gravel roads.

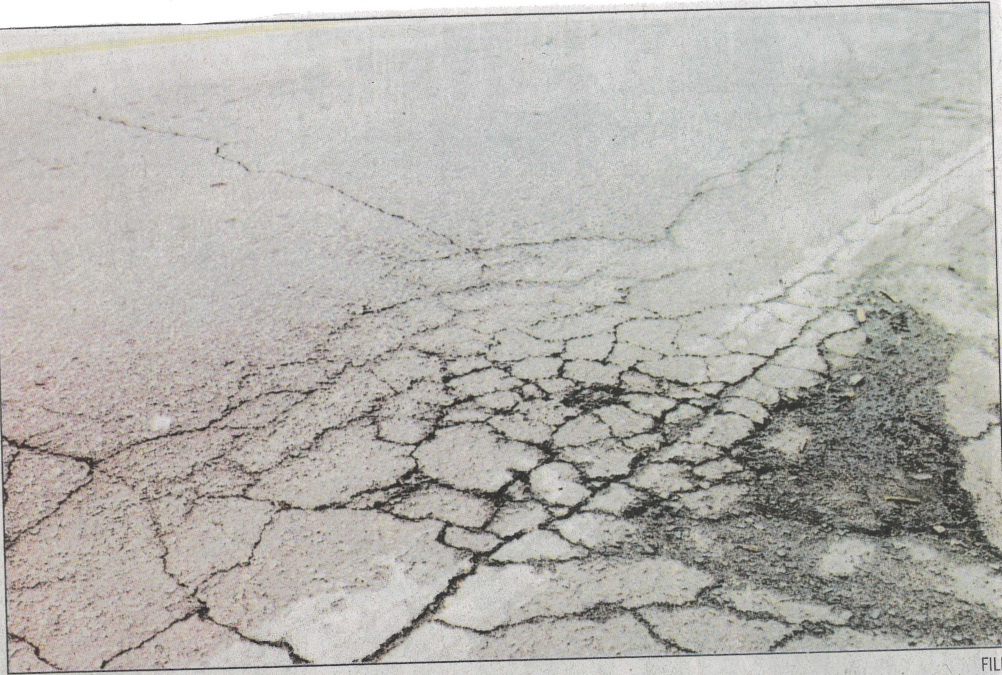
Tuesday's Budget, Finance and Administration Committee meeting will have council vote on building in initiatives from the strategic meeting with preliminary budget estimates, according to a published meeting agenda.

HELP FOR WESTMINSTER RECREATION IMPORTANT FOR DAVIS

Davis, whose district includes Westminster, said his top priority was to develop a \$1 million grant to the city "for recreation improvements that would enhance some economic development incentives and investment in our youth and culture in that area."

The city of Westminster is still mapping out a course of funding for the 62-acre Hall Road property it bought almost two years ago for a recreation complex.

"This would provide an impact of working alongside their city as well as their council to develop what that improvement would be — whether that's a gym or ... multipurpose facility," he said.



FILE

Talk of rehabilitating roads at a strategic retreat for the Oconee County Council last week was a main point of discussion.

MORE INDUSTRIAL PARK GRADING?

Councilman Glenn Hart opened the priority setting session saying he knew an "Oconee County business that has an interest in 20 acres" of the Golden Corner Commerce Park (GCCP) on S.C. Highway 59. The long vacant park was purchased by the county nearly 20 years ago and council just recently made a commitment to begin the process to grade 42 acres to become pad ready. Hart said the more than 300-plus acre property needed to be subdivided.

Council tentatively agreed to bid out two projects for the property — one to grade the 42 acres and one to grade everything.

OTHER PRIORITIES SHARED

Other priorities thrown out by council members included Hart calling for the old magistrate office in downtown Westminster to be converted into council chambers for the city's

council. He also wanted to see how the county could help demolish the old Fair Play School, a slight change from his request he made the previous two years to outright raze the property. The county doesn't own the land the school is on. Davis said he wanted to continue sending \$150,000 annually to the Foothills Agricultural Resource and Marketing (FARM) Center. He also wanted the county to focus on moving forward on a feasibility study that proposed a \$5 million administrative annex renovation that would also secure elections held at the county.

Elliott joked he was going to be "selfish this year" in that all of his priorities were outside of the district he represents. His top priority was getting sewer service to Exit 1 and Exit 4 on Interstate 85, hiring a temporary outside urban planning consultant possibly in conjunction with Clemson University, increasing sheriff's office salaries,

building more airport hangars — of which he

said 60 to 70 planes were already on a waiting list — and grading the entirety of GCCP. Brock did say hangars can't be built on land that was purchased with Federal Aviation Administration money, making the current land mass for expansion "pretty small."

BROADBAND UPDATE

Separately, Brock said Upcountry Fiber, an internet provider created by Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFI-

BER, a subsidiary of West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative, estimates it will have made a \$150 million investment at the completion of its fiber internet rollout that started in summer 2021. More than 4,500 new customers in Oconee County have come online in the past seven months, Brock said.

"That's incredible," she said.

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