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Council nixes road-user fee

By **DIONNE GLEATON**, T&D Staff Writer Tuesday, August 12, 2008

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BAMBERG – Bamberg County Council failed to approve a proposed \$30 road-user fee during its Monday night meeting, sending the proposal back to the drawing board as it struggles to reconcile a \$650,000 budget deficit.

The council had earlier proposed a dollar-per-acre fire and rescue protection fee to help pump funds into the county's operational budget. After more than 75 people showed up to oppose the fee at a July 24 meeting, the council unanimously defeated the proposal.

With the failure Monday night of the proposal that would have charged each registered vehicle owner an annual road-user fee of \$30, the county council now finds itself with an additional \$400,000 shortfall.

The motion to approve the road-user fee failed by a 3-4 vote, with Councilmen Clair Guess, William Nimmons and Clint Carter in favor of the proposal and council members Dot Tatum, the Rev. Isaiah Odom, Alzena Robinson and Council Chairman Chris Wilson voting against the measure.

"What that means is we have not passed the land impact fee and we have not passed a road vehicle impact fee. So, there's \$650,000 worth of money that we were anticipating raising ... to operate the county that is now not there," Wilson said.

"So, we will be figuring out how to cut ... about 9 percent of our budget out, which means there's a chance that law enforcement, ambulance, fire, library, courthouse and every other entity that operates in this county may be looking at some form of a cut," he said. "We just flat can't raise the millage to cover that kind of budget shortfall."

Residents Carl Kilgus, Bill Kilgus, Olin Bishop and Buddy Williams were among those attending the meeting who spoke on the issue.

Bishop asked whether the board could consider implementing a one-cent sales tax rather than implementing what he considered an "unfair" road-user fee.

Wilson said one-cent sales tax funds cannot be raised for use as general operating revenues but rather for specific county projects.

Bamberg County Administrator Rose Dobson-Elliott said, "It's for capital expenditures, and it goes on for

seven years until that expenditure is paid for. Then, you can vote to extend it for additional capital items. None of the items that we have in this budget actually meet statutory requirements for funding.”

Bill Kilgus said he was concerned about having a tax put on his antique cars, which he had understood to be tax exempt. Williams questioned how long the council’s shortfall issues had been building up.

“We’ve operated mostly every year with some deficit. We’ve either had to increase millage, or we’ve had to increase millage and go into reserves,” said Wilson, noting that reserve dipping was traditionally not something the council opted to do.

“This is the first time that I’ve been on council ... that we have had such a deficit, with such a limited ability to raise money and raise taxes,” he said.

“We’re faced with a 9 percent increase over last year’s expenditures for this budget,” Councilman Clair Guess said. “In some of those categories with public service such as the sheriff’s department, fire and public works, ... the gasoline expense ... is up 55 percent. We’re going to have less services” after the budget is cut.

Wilson said the council was going to have the act on the budget, especially since the dissemination of tax notices to county residents was already being delayed.

In other business, council members agreed to meet to examine changing its ordinance related to membership on the Bamberg County Hospital Board. The council will meet with the hospital board and make recommendations about the concerns they have with the ordinance.

The council has already approved first reading, in title only, of an ordinance stipulating a 10-person hospital board – seven to be appointed by Bamberg County Council. The ordinance also calls for a three-member panel of physicians as advisory, non-voting members.

Robinson proposed having the meeting so that stronger ties could be developed between the council and the hospital board.

“When we vote against a physician because they may live in a particular district, then that’s not right. So, we just need to solve it. It’s just a discussion,” she said.

Wilson, however, noted that a three-member committee had already been charged with examining the issues of changing the ordinance with the help of consultant Eric Shell of Stroudwater Associates. Shell was hired by the county to conduct a review of the hospital.

Guess has been an outspoken critic of what he has said is disproportionate representation by one district of people on the board. He has said having doctors voting on the board presents a conflict of interest because they’re involving themselves with their income stream.

“The reality ... is that the board at this period and time does not represent the complexion of the county as elected,” Guess said Monday. “It is stacked tremendously in favor of one district over another and, in fact, is dysfunctional.”

He added, “The hospital board failed to define the issues in a timely manner that we’re fighting now. It does need to represent equally all the districts in the county ... and medical representation is badly needed, be it advisory or voting. I think that’s up to each of us and the rest of the council.”

“If they want to run the hospital, then they need to step up to the plate with their checkbook instead of the other 16,000 people in this county having to foot the bill for somebody’s bad mistake,” Councilman Clint Carter said.

“This is totally uncalled for,” Carter added, noting that unequal representation, as Guess pointed out, was a reason the financially embattled hospital was in the shape it was in.

“The reality of it is that the county owns the hospital. It’s not a partner, and we ought to treat it as such because we are now faced with the responsibility of fixing it as a parent. The current board ought to be disbanded until we can fix the problem and then recreate it under a pilot program that makes sense,”

Guess said.

Tatum said she would “never vote to take a vote away from a doctor.”

“The hospital’s run by doctors. I don’t think they ought to be advisory. They’re in the hospital every day. They know what’s going on,” she said.

Also during the meeting, council:

* Was introduced to Kelle Anderson, the new Bamberg County project manager with the Southern Carolina Alliance economic development group

* Approved the reappointment of resident Trampas Alderman to the Thoroughbred Country Tourism Advisory Committee.

* Approved the appointment of Nancy Foster to fill the unexpired term of Carl Kilgus on the Thoroughbred Country Tourism Advisory Committee until January 2010. Guess and Robinson abstained.

* Was informed by interim Bamberg County Hospital administrator Kurt Meyer that the main purpose of a hospital board meeting earlier the same day was to finalize issues relating to an upcoming visit from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services this week.

“We want to make sure we have all our ducks in a row,” said Meyer, noting that the facility’s Kearsse and Bradley wings are closed for continuing renovations and repairs, while medical staff and patient care issues were also rectified. Environmental issues are being corrected, he said, with the audit books for June and July now closed.

* Following an executive session, approved the expenditure of another \$100,000 from a \$1.5 million bond the council had previously approved to offset the hospital’s debt and address safety issues. The bonds are to be distributed on an as-needed basis for specific hospital projects only.

“There were some construction issues that they have to address with the CMS (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services), and those are the ones we’re working on,” Dobson-Elliott said Tuesday.

T&D Staff Writer [Dionne Gleaton](mailto:dgleaton@timesanddemocrat.com) can be reached by e-mail at dgleaton@timesanddemocrat.com or by phone at 803-533-5534.

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