

**Oconee County Board of Commissioners
Strategic Planning Meeting
Oconee Veteran's Park Conference Room
January 29, 2025 – 9:00 a.m.
Minutes**

Members Present:

Chairman John Daniell
Commissioner Mark Thomas
Commissioner Chuck Horton
Commissioner Amrey Harden
Commissioner Mark Saxon

Staff Present:

Daniel Haygood, County Attorney
Justin Kirouac, County Administrator
Holly Stephenson, County Clerk
Diane Baggett, Communications Manager
Melissa Braswell, Finance Director
Jody Woodall, Public Works Director
Cindy Prichard, KOCBC Director
Guy Herring, Planning and Code Enforcement Director
Jill Faulkner, Human Resource Director
Lisa Davol, Parks and Recreation Director
Adam Layfield, Water Resources Director
Crystal Berisko, Animal Services Director
Whitney Sperlik, Civic Center Director
Justin Milligan, IT Director
Tristen Thomas, Management Analyst

Call to Order: 9:03 a.m.

Chairman Daniell opened the meeting requesting direction from the Board on some major items.

Senior Exemption Update:

Chairman Daniell stated 2025 is the first year of the new Homestead Exemptions that were voted on in 2024. All ten ballot questions passed with at least 69% voter approval for these to take effect. The prior State minimum of \$2,000, which is 100% funded by the county, is being increased to \$3,000 this year, and then to \$8,000 in 2035. Anyone 65 or older will have an automatic assessment freeze, while anyone 75 and older will receive an additional \$10,000 credit.

HB 581 Discussion:

Chairman Daniell stated the Commission has a strong record on taxes, lowering the millage rate each year since 2021. While the rate has dropped each year, the dollar amount of taxes has increased for many citizens due to assessment increases. The referendum for House Bill 581 passed with 63% voter approval in the State of Georgia and 64% voter approval in Oconee County. The bill creates a floating homestead exemption so the assessed value can only increase by the amount of the inflation based on an index. 2024 is the base year with no increase in 2025.

The valuation would reset upon sale of the property, and any substantial change in the property would result in an increased value.

There is a one-time opt out with a March 1, 2025 deadline. Chairman Daniell recommends not opting out based on voter choice, but asked for input from the other Commissioners. The bill also includes the requirement that an estimated millage rate be set by March. If the actual rate exceeds the estimate, there will be a required disclaimer on the tax bills. The three-year lock for appeals will be modified to apply only if you win your appeal. The homeowner must participate in their settlement conference for a reduction in tax liabilities or to have attorney fees paid.

If all the cities choose to remain in HB581, there is the opportunity for a 1% sales tax referendum option for five years. This would result in a dollar for dollar reduction in property tax collection. The mayors are currently assessing their numbers to decide whether to stay in or opt out for their city. There is no effect to the County if the School Board opts out.

The consensus between Commissioners was in favor of House Bill 581 and remaining a part of the program.

Courthouse Capital Improvement:

Chairman Daniell stated plans began in June 2023 for a capital improvement project for the Courthouse. A concept development phase with Precision Planning, Inc was approved in June 2023, with a final concept presented in October 2023. Once elevator modernization was completed and probation changes were addressed, the concept plan moved forward and was adopted. With funding available from SPLOST and the Capital Fund, the consensus from the Board was for the item to be placed on a future agenda for contract approval. The improvements will result in more efficiency in operations of court services and advanced security upgrades.

Parks and Recreation Updates:

County Administrator Justin Kirouac gave park updates.

Oconee Veterans Park:

The original master plan for OVP included sixteen tennis courts and a show court. The current plan is for all tennis to be at OVP, with Herman C. Michael having a pickleball focus. Design being done now will increase tennis courts at OVP from eight to twenty-four, with 90% of the design process being complete. The next phase will be to go out to bid and see what can actually be completed within budget. Once OVP is complete, a retro-fit of Herman C. Michael will be done to convert the courts there for pickleball. There could be as many as 20 pickle ball courts at HCM once converted and include lighting.

Heritage Park:

The design process is over 90% complete for an approximate \$6 million capital investment plan for Heritage Park focused on equestrian, mountain biking, 4-H and FFA groups.

Area 1 includes entranceway improvements, parking, restroom building, grading, and drainage.

Area 2 focuses on an uncovered outdoor arena with turf and irrigation, grading, and drainage.

Area 3 includes RV parking, horse trailer parking, grading, and working with GDOT for a second entrance to the park.

Area 4 concludes the plan with improvements for the arena, led lighting, irrigation, and upgrades to existing restrooms.

Once complete, the focus will turn to operation, staffing, and maintaining the park.

Dawson Park:

County Administrator Justin Kirouac presented three graphic phasing options for Dawson Park phase one design which will require an initial capital investment of \$15 million or more depending on the option chosen. The total investment will be approximately \$88 million for park completion. A traffic study will be completed, and the design will include two access points to the park. The LAS site is planned to be decommissioned in December, 2025 which is when construction could begin on phase one of the park. The biggest request from citizens is more field space, so that will be a primary focus.

Commissioner Horton advocated for more gym space, along with partnering with the Park Foundation for fundraising.

Commissioner Harden discussed the possibility of a bond referendum which would require citizen vote, but then the project would be paid for by both current and future park users. The consensus of the Board was to move forward with Option B, which would provide six fields with parking in the initial phase.

Sidewalks and Trails: County Administrator Justin Kirouac explained the initial master plan for sidewalks and trails from 2023 included three priority levels.

Priority One is a large connecting network trail along Highway 53 from Highway 441 to Rocky Branch Road to connect Dawson Park, back to Mars Hill, and down Daniels Bridge Road back to Highway 53.

Priority Two is from the Clarke County line to the Morgan County line.

Priority Three is for portions of the Apalachee and Middle Oconee Rivers with kayak access points. The first portion of 2.08 miles along Hog Mountain Road is currently under construction from Highway 441 to Butlers Crossing.

The second phase would be from Dawson Park to Oconee High School. Initial feedback has been primarily negative on the Hog Mountain Trail, so Mr. Kirouac questioned the Board as to what priority should be given to Priority Two and Priority Three at this time.

Chairman Daniell explained that the section under construction is a non-motorized path for pedestrians and bicycles only which is being completed to connect two commercial nodes while funding is in place. Due to mostly negative feedback, Chairman Daniell is not interested in continuing with any other trails at this time. He requested feedback from the other Commissioners on whether to continue with Phase Two. The consensus was to hold off at this time, but if trails are continued long term, Daniels Bridge Road should be considered as the next portion that would have the most impact.

Commissioner Harden suggested neighborhoods be able to set up as specific tax districts for sidewalk construction, similar to street light tax districts. County Attorney Haygood advised that is allowable by county ordinance. The process is often funded through the government, then paid back by the tax district. Commissioner Thomas also encouraged these tax districts.

Chairman Daniell requested a five-minute break.

Transportation Updates:

Chairman Daniell reviewed three spreadsheets with transportation projects in Oconee County.

State Projects Updates: See attached spreadsheet - GDOT Projects in Oconee County

State/Local Joint Projects Updates: See attached spreadsheet - Oconee County Joint Projects

County Projects Updates: See attached spreadsheet - Oconee County Projects

TSPLOST:

Chairman Daniell explained current collection is right on track with anticipated collection, so current projects should be completely funded. Collection from the current TSPLOST will end on March 31, 2028. Chairman Daniell proposed a spring of 2026 referendum on SPLOST and fall of 2026 referendum on TSPLOST.

Chairman Daniell discussed the Cole Springs/Clotfelter Road at Highway 53 intersection. He stated there is likely no State funding and obtaining any Federal funding could delay a project by years. County construction and design with an encroachment permit could be considered under the next TSPLOST with GDOT approval. The consensus of Commissioners was to move forward with design at the county level with 100% county funding to speed up completion of this intersection.

SPLOST Discussion:

Chairman Daniell stated an MOU with all the cities allows for 6-year collection of SPLOST, with a projected collection of \$72 million, over \$20 million more than estimated. He attributes a significant portion of the excess funds to COSTCO. He presented an attachment titled Oconee County SPLOST 2021 to detail where the additional funds could be used to include the early payoff of OVP bond debt.

Next, he presented an attachment titled Oconee County Capital Fund 1/25/2025 showing where capital funds are currently allocated.

County Administrator Justin Kirouac added that the Calls Creek Upgrade Project is being completed. The next focus will be to see where sewer lines may need to upgrade to be upgraded, upgrade in lift stations, and the decommission of the LAS site.

Fiscal Policy Update Discussion:

County Administrator Justin Kirouac stated the Fiscal Policy was last updated in 2020. He outlined the proposed changes to include increasing spending limits level to increase efficiency and make us more competitive to secure vendors. Other changes include aligning banking RFP's with all other RFP's, removing the ability to have facsimile stamps on financial docs, changing deposit requirement from 30 days to 3 days, updating competitive bid requirements for multi-year contracts, and changing the sole source option. This item will be considered at the February Agenda Meeting.

Discussion on Possible Personnel Policy Updates:

Chairman Daniell explained some potential future Personal Policy Updates. These include wording cleanup, requiring comp time be used prior to vacation or sick leave use, Veteran's Day as a holiday, investigate moving to a PTO program, and a potential "leave buy back" program.

Commissioner Harden suggested a Leave Donation Policy be considered in the future for employees in need.

Health Insurance Discussion:

Chairman Daniell asked the other Commissioners for a decision on whether to explore self-funded health insurance or to remain fully insured. He explained that proposals were obtained from firms that could give a higher-level perspective on whether the county should consider self-funded at this time. The final and true cost of going self-funded can not be determined until we contract with a firm to access our claims data details. The firm would then produce a recommendation to

remain fully insured or to move to self-funded. There should be no impact to employees or additional liability incurred during this investigative period. He states that if the Board has no interest in self-funded, an RFP will be issued for fully insured brokerage services since it has not been to market in a very long time.

Commissioner Thomas stated his research shows there are benefits that are not known until further research is done. He is in favor of investigating self-funded insurance. Commissioner Harden stated the evolution of the insurance market requires the Board to stay open to all options that would not only save money, but benefit the employees. Commissioner Saxon is open to looking into what is best for the employees. Chairman Daniell stated the RFP is still open, so it will be presented to the Board again at the February Agenda Meeting.

Other Items:

Commissioner Harden asked the status of the Jimmy Daniel recycling site with the GDOT plans. Chairman Daniell explained this center will be lost and not replaced as no alternative location has been located.

Commissioner Thomas asked that with this being the 150-year anniversary of Oconee County that we look into adding historical documents to the website and a identify a place to store historical artifacts and items.

Chairman Daniell announced the 150-year celebration to be held on Saturday, February 22, 2025 at the William Daniell House from 10am-4pm.

County Administrator Justin Kirouac added that the Staff would review objectives and goals to develop a work program to align with the Board's policy goals.

Meeting adjourned 11:33am.


Chairman John Daniell


Holly Stephenson, County Clerk


Date

GDOT Projects In Oconee County

						Schedule as of 01.27.2025		
State Route	Project ID	Intersection	Project	Contractor	Design	ROW	Construction	Completion
Bundle 2	SR 316	0013767	Jimmy Daniell	Archer Western			2025	2028
		0013768	Virgil Langford					
		0013769	Oconee Connector					
	SR 24 / 441	0013613	Morgan County to Bishop	4-Lane	2019	2023	2028	
	SR 24 / 441	0015925	Bishop	By-pass	tbd	tbd	tbd	
	SR 316	0013763	Dials Mill/DM Extention	Interchange	2021	2024	2025	
	SR 316	0013764	McNutt's Creek	RI/RO	2022	2026	2027	
	SR 316	0013765	Mars Hill	Culdesac	2023	2028	2030	
	SR 316	0013766	Julian Drive	TBD	2025	2027	2030	
	SR 316	0013770	GA 10 Loop	Interchange	2030	tbd	tbd	
	SR 15	0017970	Watkinsville	By-pass	2024	2026	2028 - 2051	
	SR 53	0007942	US441/SR24	Interchange	2047	2049	2051	
	SR 53	0009012	SR24/US441 Bypass to Main St	Widening	tbd	tbd	tbd	
	SR10/US78	M005581	Walton to Clarke	Paving			2025	2025

GDOT Oconee County Joint Projects

State Route	Project ID	Intersection	Project	Contractor	Schedule as of 01.27.2025			
					Design	ROW	Construction	Completion
SR53	0017185	Snows Mill / Rocky Branch	Roundabout	E R Snell			2025	Q1 2026
SR53	0017186	Malcolm Bridge / Ray's Church	Roundabout		12.2024		2026	
Clotfelter Road	0015656	Barber Creek	Bridge	E R Snell			2025	2025
Bishop Farms North	0016081	Bishop Farms South	Connection			tbd	tbd	tbd
SR 53	0009011	Mars Hill to SR24/US 441 Bypass	Widening	E R Snell				Q3 2026

GDOT Oconee County Joint Projects

State Route	Project ID	Intersection	Project	Contractor	Schedule as of 01.27.2025			
					Design	ROW	Construction	Completion
SR53	0017185	Snows Mill / Rocky Branch	Roundabout	E R Snell			2025	Q1 2026
SR53	0017186	Malcolm Bridge / Ray's Church	Roundabout		12.2024		2026	
Clotfelter Road	0015656	Barber Creek	Bridge	E R Snell			2025	2025
Bishop Farms North	0016081	Bishop Farms South	Connection			tbd	tbd	tbd
SR 53	0009011	Mars Hill to SR24/US 441 Bypass	Widening	E R Snell				Q3 2026

Oconee County Projects

Road	Intersection	Project	Contractor	Schedule as of 01.27.2025			
				Design	ROW	Construction	Completion
Snow's Mill	Lane Creek	Roundabout	02.04.2025			2025	2026
New High Shoals	Union Church	Roundabout				2025	2026
Astondale	Colham Ferry	Roundabout		2025			
Cole Springs	Snow's Mill / Aycock	Roundabout		2025			
Moore's Ford	Lane Creek	Roundabout		2025			
SR53	Cole Springs / Clotfelter	Roundabout		2025 ?			
Atlanta Highway	Burson	Signal Replacement				2025	2025
Miller's Lake Dr	Miller's Lake	Culvert Replacement				Q4 2024	2025

Oconee County SPLOST 2021

Collection Starts 10/01/2021
Collection Ends 09/30/2027

	Original		January 2025 Updated Allocations	
	Budget	Referendum		
GO Bond - OVP	4,396,000	5,703,250	6,765,079	+ Interest
Water Resources	6,000,000	7,784,235	8,000,000	
Roads	11,500,000	12,375,656	13,054,000	
Farmland Protection	600,000	778,424	700,000	
Fire Rescue	3,125,000	4,054,289	3,259,039	
Library / Admin	5,500,000	7,135,549	7,000,000	
Historic	100,000	129,737	125,000	
Broadband	5,000,000	6,486,863	200,000	
General Facilities	3,100,000	4,453,880	4,315,662	
Courthouse Renovation	500,000	648,686	650,000	
P&R	2,700,000	3,502,906	15,136,185	
SO Vehicles	2,064,000	2,677,775	2,864,000	
	44,585,000	55,731,250	62,068,966	
Cities	7,133,600	8,917,000	9,931,034	
	51,718,600	64,648,250	72,000,000	

Oconee County Capital Fund
1/25/2025

Courthouse Renovation	3,000,000
SR53@ Snows Mill	140,548
SR53@ Ray's Church	404,450
ROW Acquisition	2,500,000
Intersection Safety Design	55,408
Intersection Safety Construction	2,500,000
Hog Mtn Path Construction	2,000,000
WBD Conversion Phase I	1,000,000
WBD Conversion Phase I	3,000,000
Field Services Building	10,072,200
Hwy 15 By-Pass/ SR53 Design	0
Heritage Park	3,000,000
BFP	600,000
Landfill/Recycle Building Replace	500,000
Landfill Scale	100,000
Broadband Grant With Charter	602,750
Sheriff's Equipment LCM	
Tower Microwave Replacement	500,000
E911 LCM: Viper / CAD	406,000
Jail Equipment	25,000
Jail Cooler	100,000
FY24 Capital Carryover	
P&R Groomer	78,000
Jennings Mill	800,000
E911 UPS	70,000
E911 Tower HVAC Control	39,400
BOC Chamber	31,270
Admin RAB	168,242
	31,693,268
	31,693,268