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Cleburne County to get \$1.5 million from state fund for spill cleanup

By Zach Tyler, Star Staff Writer, ztyler@annistonstar.com Feb 21, 2017

HEFLIN — After initially being denied the money, Cleburne County will get up to \$1.5 million from a state trust fund to help clean up a fuel spill at a former county fueling station, commissioners learned Tuesday.

The money comes after the county has already spent more than \$1.2 million sucking thousands of gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel from the ground around the station. The fuel had leaked from lines feeding storage tanks there, a situation discovered in 2014.

County Administrator Steve Swafford told commissioners the Alabama Department of Environmental Management — which had denied the fund money after the leak — reversed course this month after choosing “a different way to look” at the spill.

The state agency holds the purse strings to the Alabama Underground and Aboveground Storage Tank Trust Fund, an account established in 1989 and fed by a per-gallon fee on gasoline that pays for cleanup of fuel spills.

“This will be a tremendous benefit for Cleburne County going forward,” Swafford told commissioners. Costs associated with the cleanup would have otherwise “taken money from the road department for years to come.”

The reversal came after commissioners pledged to ask lawmakers for help with that cleanup — which has grown to a crippling cost.

The plea apparently worked; commission chairman Ryan Robertson, after calling the news “a blessing,” praised commissioners Laura Cobb and Emmett Owen for meeting with those legislators.

“It was getting to the point we didn’t know where we were going,” Owen said after the meeting. “There’s just no way a little county like us could take this on.”

Commissioners on Tuesday also took a step toward filling a long-vacant human resource officer position.

Owen, Cobb, and Commissioner Terry Hendrix voted in favor of accepting applications for the next seven days from current county employees for the position. After that, the position would be advertised at large.

Owen proposed the action, saying after the meeting he did so because he was “tired of talking about it.” The county has been without an officer — whose tasks range from payroll management to insurance plan oversight — since June.

Commissioner Jake Durham voted against the resolution, saying he didn’t know the county’s hiring procedure for the position.



It’s not clear that the action approved Tuesday follows that procedure.

Commissioners in October deemed the position “unclassified,” essentially making themselves responsible for hiring a new officer. County policy requires applications for such positions be submitted to the commission, but Owen on Tuesday asked chief finance officer Kim Brown be responsible for collecting them.

The policy also allows that such positions “be filled ... at the pleasure of the appointing authority,” in this case, the commission, and that they be advertised for at least seven days — but does not explicitly state that county employee applications for unclassified positions should be given first priority.

In other business, the commission:

— Approved a series of resolutions. One measure expressed support for a proposal by the Association of County Commissions of Alabama to seek a \$1.2 billion bond for road and bridge construction and repair, financed by a corresponding 3-cent increase in the tax on gasoline. Some \$8 million of that money could go to Cleburne County. Another resolution required heads of county departments to notify commissioners if they leave Cleburne County, such as for meetings or other events.

— Purchased three crew cab pickup trucks for the county engineer at \$77,514, and spent another \$27,065 on a new van for an inmate work program at the Cleburne County Sheriff’s Office.

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