

Savings Made on Computer Plan

BY BEN HOGWOOD

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BEAUFORT — Through creative bidding and setting a five-year replacement cycle, the county and the school system have struck a plan that both replaces computers and upgrades technology in schools and saves big money for taxpayers.

"It was a real incredible partnership between the school system and county government," said Joe Poletti, director of technology and media for the school system, on the arrangement.

County Manager John Langdon informed the County Board of Commissioners of its considerable savings Aug. 20, during the board's regular meeting in the county administration building. The county is expecting to save \$230,000 this year alone and possibly more than \$500,000 over five years.

The need for computer and technology replacement in schools first came up this year during budget discussions. The County Board of Education requested around \$1.2 million from the county to replace 780 computers, as well as printers, projectors, three servers and a wireless network for one school.

Mr. Langdon said that for several years, the county underfunded the school system's technology needs. The schools first implemented computers into the classrooms in the mid-1990s, Mr. Langdon said, so replacement wasn't needed until 1999. At that time, the county gave the school system around \$400,000, but the next two years the amount diminished and in 2002, the school system didn't get any money for replacement.

When the school board came to the county for money this year, it was asking to be funded for computers that it could ride into obsolescence — around 10 years — as no replacement schedule had ever been set up and it didn't know when it would be funded again.

"Once we realized our funding was going to be erratic — one year it was zero, one year it was around \$190,000 — it was up and down and never enough," Mr. Poletti said. The school system began requesting computers with the highest specifications to last as long as possible.

Mr. Langdon met with school information technology (IT) officials to determine exactly how many computers and other items were needed, then struck upon a reasonable replacement cycle. That cycle was determined to be five years.

As a result, the county no longer needed to purchase the highest-end computers. Now, instead of buying laptops the school system had priced at \$1,650, it could purchase laptops that it priced at \$1,250.

In June, the County Board of Commissioners agreed to borrow \$2 million to purchase the technology equipment. This reduced taxpayers from paying a one-time wallop, Mr. Langdon said. The school board agreed to limit its funding request for technology for the life of the loan.

While the cycle saved the county a considerable amount of money, Mr. Langdon said it was still using figures for computers provided by the school system, which it had gotten from just one vendor.

The county decided to seek bids from other vendors, and rather than specify the exact model of computer it wanted, it instead listed the capabilities the computers needed.

"Now the price of poker was going down," Mr. Langdon said.

At the eleventh hour, Dell Marketing jumped into the competition and undercut all the other vendors, offering a price on the laptops of just \$1,020, more than \$200 less than the previous price.

The plan now is to replace 60 percent of computers in the schools this year — a total of 1,475 — with half of those coming around October and the rest

coming next year, possible around February. In addition, the school system will receive 94 printers, 264 data projectors, five servers and wireless networks for 10 schools.

Mr. Langdon said the county purchased exactly the same brands and models of computers, with the same capabilities, that the school IT officials requested.

"We didn't get these savings by purchasing lesser equipment capabilities or lesser quality than what school officials wanted," Mr. Langdon said.

Already, the county has saved around \$230,000 on just the first half of the planned numbers of computers and projectors to be purchased this fiscal year, he said.

Mr. Langdon said he thinks the county can purchase three years of equipment for what it had budgeted for just two years, and what the county initially thought would cost \$2 million now looks like it will only cost \$1.4 to \$1.5 million.

Next year the county will spend around \$192,925, primarily to outfit the remaining seven schools with wireless technology, then an average of \$350,000 per year over the next three years.

So far, the school system has installed three servers, received the wireless network equipment for one school and the 264 printers are currently in the shipping process, Mr. Poletti said.

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