Movie puts spotlight on Oconee

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — The filming of "Elbow Grease" began early Monday at a home on Friendship Road, away from the public's eye.

Local officials are proud that producers chose locations in Seneca and other parts of the county to make the movie, which stars Burt Reynolds. They hope the former heartthrob of the 1970s and '80s will muster a memorable performance that will get a wide audience talking about the movie, and the place where it was filmed.

Riley Johnson, Seneca's events coordinator, is one of the optimists. Johnson points to "Smokey and the Bandit," the 1977 hit that starred Reynolds.

"A lot of those scenes were filmed in Helen, Ga.," Johnson said. "It gave that community a lot of exposure that it still enjoys today."

The scenario Johnson is hoping for is one in which "Elbow Grease" hits the big screen, becomes a blockbuster and will have people wanting to know more about Seneca.

"Wouldn't it be great that because of this movie people will say, 'Let's go check out Ram Cat Alley,'" Johnson said.

Ken Sloan, who heads the Mountain Lakes Convention & Visitors Bureau, said the 1972 movie "Deliv-

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erance," which also starred Reynolds, is still talked about. He said "Deliverance" helped make whitewater rafting the popular pastime it is today.

Sloan said it's too early to know what the impact "Elbow Grease" will have on the area.

"I hope it gets released and makes it to the big screen," Sloan said. "There are so many movies that don't make it."

Sloan said big-star names don't always translate to success at the box office. He said that appears to have been the fate of "Killing Season" starring Robert DeNiro and John Travolta. The movie had a token release in theaters ahead of its arrival on video this summer.

Sloan said some of the scenes in the De Niro-Travolta film were shot in Clayton, Ga.

The immediate impact of "Elbow Grease" won't be fully felt in Oconee because of Clemson University football, Sloan said.

Sloan said that because hotels in Oconee and Pickens have been booked for Clemson home games, much of the film crew is staying in Anderson.

"They're eating and spending money, but we're losing some of that because our hotel rooms are booked," Sloan said.

Economic Development Director Richard Blackwell said Oconee already is getting statewide coverage because "Elbow Grease" is being filmed here. He said the county also is the backdrop for two other film productions, including a reality show.

"Everything that's being filmed in South Carolina, all three are in Oconee County," Blackwell said. "We have a great story to tell. We're blessed by our assets — three lakes, the mountains. It's just a matter of getting our story out there."

The Journal staff writer Norman Cannada contributed to this story.

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JESSICA NELMS | THE

ound mixer Adam Johnson, left, and boom operator Matthew Nielson begin shooting scenes Monday for the film "Elbow Grease," starring Burt Reynolds. The actor was not involved in any scenes shot at a private home off Friendship Road near Seneca. Associate producer and casting director Shelby Henderson and producer Paul Papadeas stand in the background.