Tourism promoter sees good signs

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WESTMINSTER — True to her calling as a teacher, Mildred Spearman recently schooled the Oconee County Council on the work to advance tourism in the county.

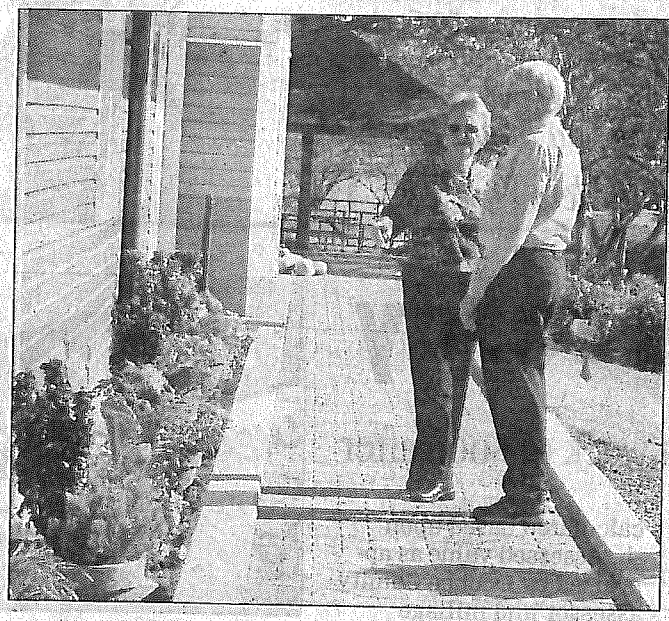
As the longtime chair of the Parks, Recreation & Tourism (PRT) Commission, Spearman presented her report to council on how that important branch of county operations is faring.

A native of Florence, Spearman has a genuine appreciation of everything Oconee County has to offer visitors, from the lakes and mountains to waterfalls and whitewater rafting opportunities.

Just as she has a soft spot in her heart for the children she taught at Tamassee DAR School for many years and watched embark on their own professional careers, she also has a soft spot for promoting local tourism.

Spearman senses that Oconee is on the brink of witnessing a new thrust toward advancing tourism as a major economic driver.

She sees signs of it with the new broader mission statement recently adopted by the Oconee County Economic Development Commission, which now references improving "the quality of life for citizens" and encouraging "a diversified economy."



JESSICA NELMS | STAFF

Mildred Spearman and her husband, Jim, admire the setting outside the Westminster Depot on Monday. Mildred Spearman recently presented an upbeat report to the Oconee County Council on the state of tourism in the county.

Spearman could not say enough about the work being done by Oconee PRT Director Phil Shirley and the new focus being given to local tourism by the year-old Convention & Visitors Bureau headed by Ken Sloan.

For too many years, Spearman said on Monday, the focus on tourism was missing from Oconee County government.

Spearman said her husband, Jim, who is an Oconee native, was a member of the original PRT Commission in the 1960s when it was just Parks and Recreation and tourism was not even in the name.

Spearman said former District 4 Councilman Marion Lyles appointed her to the PRT Commission more than 10 years ago. She has chaired the PRT Commission through four or five different councils.

There was a stretch during her tenure that the PRT Department went without a director.

"We were without a director for many years," Spearman said. "There was a void. We had no leadership from the county."

During the void, Spearman said the Commission remained intact. However, even when good ideas came out of the group meetings, those ideas went nowhere because there was no director to make the case before council.

Spearman said that all changed when Shirley was hired away as Seneca's recreation director to fill the void at PRT.

"He (Shirley) was very aware of the needs," Spearman said. "He overworked himself to get things done."

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 882-2375

Oconee CVB plans hotel-conference center study

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — The Oconee County Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) passed a credibility test of sorts this week by requesting and receiving money from the County Council for a study.

Council's willingness to turn over $20,000 to the CVB, at a time when taxpayers are watching officials like hawks on how they spend public money, is a strong indicator of the trust and respect the organization has earned since its creation last year.

CVB Director Ken Sloan made the pitch for the money at Tuesday night's council meeting.

Sloan said that with four or five development plans circulating that would include the building of a hotel/conference center, he convinced council that an independent study is needed to ascertain what type of project would suit Oconee best. Such a study, he said, would come in handy when county officials like hawks on how project they'd be willing to help with incentives or other financial help.

Sloan's petition had to overcome some skepticism. During public comments Robbie Lee, who unsuccessfully sought the District 1 Council seat this year, suggested that the $30,000 to $50,000 price tag for such a study is the kind of spending that adds up to fiscal problems.

Councilman Joel Thrift called the proposal a "lollipop" study. He argued it was not really essential be undertaking their own independent studies.

Councilman Paul Corbeil championed Sloan's petition.

"This is fundamental homework to anchor future tourism," Corbeil said. He recommended giving the CVB up to $25,000.

Sloan said he would have a request for proposal (RFP) by Dec. 11 and select a consultant by the end of December or early January, so that work on the study could begin by Feb. 1.