

Visit Oconee finds new home

BY LAUREN PIERCE
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WALHALLA — What began as a trial run in 2008 has led to a new permanent location on Walhalla's Main Street for Visit Oconee SC — nearly 14 years later.

Visit Oconee president and CEO Ken Sloan said beginning Feb. 1, he'll be moving offices to 224 E. Main St., where the organization will have a space of its own.

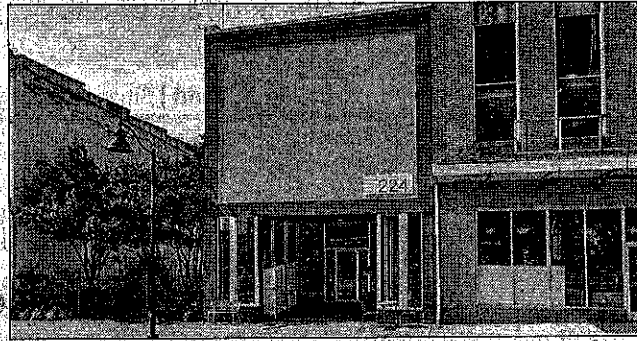
The destination marketing organization was first approved for a three-year budget by Oconee County "to determine if tourism was a viable industry" in the county in 2008, Sloan said.

"During those three years, we were given office space at 502 E. Main St. in Walhalla along with the Oconee Economic Development and the Oconee Alliance — since then, those two organizations have combined," he said. "Obviously, we passed the viability test and began looking for a permanent home for a visitors center."

In 2011, Visit Oconee moved to the Earl House that was previously on Main Street for a time.

The agency shared the location with the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce and Oconee Chamber of Commerce.

"The Earl House was the home of Dr. William B. Earl and was located where the 'new' courthouse is now on Main Street," Sloan said. "The



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Visit Oconee SC will begin moving into its new permanent location at 224 E. Main St. in Walhalla on Feb. 1.

Walhalla Partners for Progress (WP2) received grants funding from multiple sources and moved the home to its current location at 105 W. South Broad St. and did a complete restoration of the home, which was completed in 2011.

"At that time, WP2 asked me if I would like to move into the newly renovated Earl House — for free, no rent," he added. "They also reached out to the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce. As a result, I shared the Earl House with the chamber for several years until the three chambers combined and moved to the current location on Leas Courtyard Drive in Seneca."

Visit Oconee shares the renovated building with Main Street Walhalla now, but Sloan said the business has "been looking" at Main Street "for quite a while."

And the move fulfills a "vision" he's had for the business, he added.

"Our long-term vision was to be on Main Street for better visibility and

more visitor traffic," he said. "Our walk-in traffic at the Earl House has been minimal, at best, and we expect the traffic on Main Street to be substantially higher. However, our budget over the first 10 years would not support the cost of a Main Street office, but given the recent developments of short-term rentals, a few new hotels and the Lakeside Lodge, we are in a much better position to make the move, and 224 E. Main is the perfect location."

"I love my office in the historic Earl House and sincerely appreciate the city's hospitality over the last 10 years, and they understand that this move is clearly in the best interest of our business," Sloan added. "I can't wait to drive down Main Street and see our Visit Oconee logo prominently displayed along with the window dressing we are planning that will provide Main Street exposure to our tourism partners."