

Main to the mountains



CALEB GILBERT | THE JOURNAL

Visit Oconee president and CEO Ken Sloan stands in the organization's new office on Main Street in Walhalla.

Visit Oconee moves to new office in downtown Walhalla

BY ANDREA KELLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Walking in the front door of Visit Oconee's new Main Street office in Walhalla feels a bit like walking through a portal to the mountains.

Everything is quiet, except for the trickle of the manmade waterfall in the front window, and a floor-to-ceiling mural of Oconee County landscapes stretches all the way down the hall.

The tourism office operated out of the upstairs of the Earl House since its inception in 2008, but president and CEO Ken Sloan said moving to Main Street in Walhalla has always been a dream.

"We always knew if we could be on Main Street, we could get more people in, but we just didn't have the money to do it," he said. "Post-COVID tourism has been going crazy, so our budget has more than tripled in the last three years. So now we have the money, we can

afford to come in and do something like this. And it's worked out really well."

He said the former location negatively affected the number of people who even knew the office was there, let alone came to visit.

"We gave out very few visitor guides inside there. Here, we're giving out like a case a week," Sloan said. "A lot of people are coming in, and a lot of locals are

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VISIT: 'We get people from all over the nation,' Sloan said

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coming by, too — people walking down the street and didn't know we had a tourism bureau in Oconee, been here for years, and so they come in to pick up visitor guides and discover new things about Oconee that they didn't know."

People frequently stop in for directions to waterfalls and information about things to do in each town.

"We get people from all over the nation — people from Washington, several people from Chicago and New York ... it's a good blend," Sloan said. "I think the questions and the people haven't changed much, it's just the quantity."

A handy feature of the new office is an interactive wall map, painted by Westminster artist Melody Davis, marking out municipal boundaries, lakes, major highways and points of interest.

Eventually, a glass plate will cover the map so staff can sketch out directions for visitors.

"If they want to go to Issaqueena (Falls) or go to Oconee (State Park) we can show them the route and then erase it all off," Sloan explained. "When the next person comes in, we can do it again."

OTHER DETAILS

The new office also boasts a sitting area and reception desk — with a receptionist to greet visitors who stop in — as well as a full kitchen for staff and Sloan's preferred workspace.



Unused space in the lobby of the new Visit Oconee office in Walhalla was used to create a waterfall.

"This is my favorite thing in the whole place," he said, opening the back door to reveal a covered deck. "I've already had about half a dozen meetings out here. When people come in to talk, instead of going into the conference room, we come back here. ... This is just a great layout for us right here."

Though Visit Oconee technically moved into the new office in January, Sloan said the inside is a work in progress.

He plans to put a "partner program" in place for window displays and add some information on the wall above the waterfall.

Speaking of, how did he come up with the idea for an indoor waterfall?

"We were moving in, and I was out front getting some stuff out of the truck," Sloan said. "These two older guys were walking by — clas-

sic native Walhallans — and they were looking at it and said, 'What are y'all doing here?'"

Sloan told them he was moving the visitor center for Oconee County.

"They turned around and looked at that window and said, 'If you're going to do tourism for Oconee, you could put a waterfall in there.' I was looking at the window and I said, 'No kidding, I need to do that,'" he said. "I turned around to say thank you — they were gone. So, I've been looking for them to show them I put a waterfall in."

The waterfall is up and running, as is the visitor center. The office is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at 224 E. Main St. in Walhalla.



PHOTOS BY CALEB GILBERT | THE JOURNAL

Visit Oconee's new visitor center is located at 224 E. Main St. in Walhalla.