

'Together towards tomorrow'



PHOTOS BY CALEB GILBERT | THE JOURNAL

Walhalla native talks at State of Oconee, first held since 2019

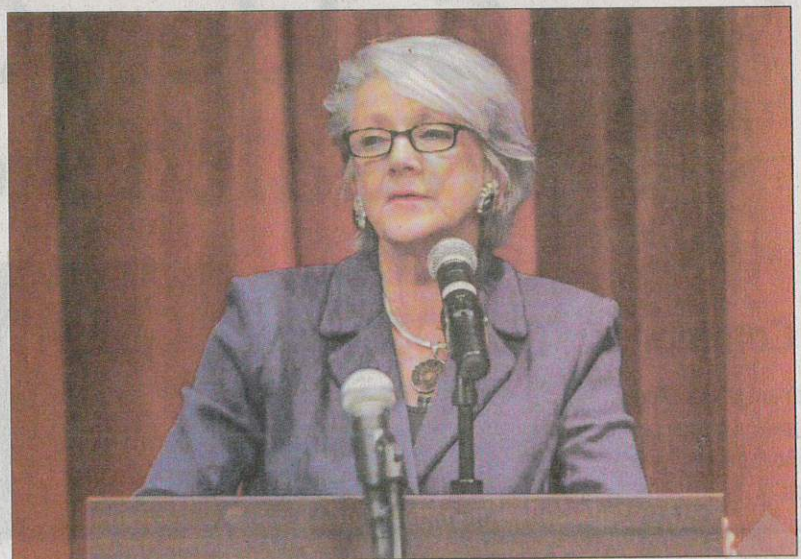
BY ANDREA KELLEY
THE JOURNAL

WESTMINSTER — Nearly 100 people gathered Friday at West-Oak High School for the State of Oconee address, revived for the first time since 2019.

Elected officials from multiple levels of government showed up for the event organized by the Oconee County Chamber of Commerce, along with representatives from multiple cities, businesses and the School District of Oconee County.

Chamber president Dari McBride took a moment to thank sponsors and chamber partners for their support for the past several years.

“Having a membership-based organization that depends heavily on having events and making connections with



Top: Lunch is held at West-Oak High School for this year's State of Oconee luncheon. **Bottom:** Dr. Theresa Gonzales, keynote speaker, speaks at the 2023 State of Oconee Luncheon.

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ADDRESS

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people is very hard to keep going during COVID," she said. "I do want to say a special thank you to our investors, and to our board who stepped up to the plate to keep your Oconee County Chamber of Commerce running, because it would not have been without them."

State Senate President Thomas Alexander of Walhalla then took the microphone for a short thank you to the community.

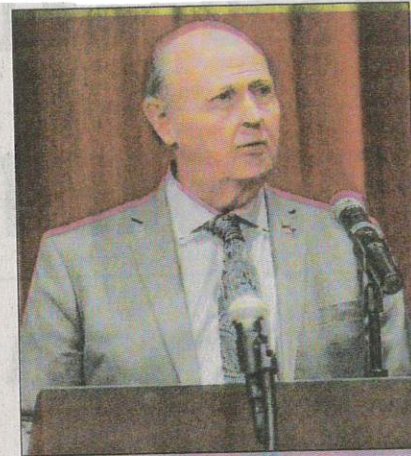
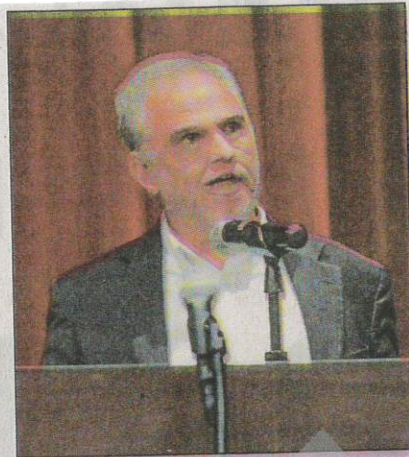
"We have so many wonderful things going on in Oconee County, and it's because of you," he said, looking around the audience. "Your commitment, your involvement, your dedication, your willingness to step up in any role that you are to make Oconee County a better place for us all to live, work and play."

'NOT DONE YET'

Jamie Gilbert, director of economic development for Oconee Economic Alliance, shared an overview of development in Oconee. Workforce development is a widespread issue, Gilbert said, but the county's workforce continues to grow and is oriented toward the manufacturing companies the OEA is trying to attract.

"We're really focused on several types of projects: advanced manufacturing, three types of metal fabrication, transportation, which includes automotive and aerospace, and plastics," he said. "We also are now focused on commercial development, mixed use retail ... and then there's redevelopment projects."

The county attracts businesses because it's done its "due diligence" of putting in infrastructure and studying potential build sites to help "win projects," he added.



Pictured, from left, is Oconee County Chamber of Commerce President Dari McBride, Director of Economic Development for Oconee Economic Alliance Jamie Gilbert, State Senate President Thomas Alexander, and Clemson University Assistant to the President Julio Hernandez.

Gilbert sang the praises of having places like the Hamilton Career and Technology Center, Tri-County Technical College and the Oconee Industry and Technology Park to partner in training students for jobs at the surrounding companies.

Gilbert said 2023 was the best year the county has had for new and expanding businesses "for as far back as we can track." Investments were 126 percent higher than the prior 10-year average, he said, and new jobs were 132 percent higher.

"A lot has happened in the last year," Gilbert said. "We're not done yet."

'WHO WE ARE'

The chamber welcomed Walhalla native Dr. Theresa Gonzales as the keynote speaker for the event. Gonzales graduated from Walhalla High School, then went to College of Charleston and on to the Medical University of South Carolina College of Dental Medicine before entering military service as a volunteer.

Gonzales went on to serve in many posts on five continents before retiring in 2013. She now lives in Charleston, but said anytime she drives back to the Golden Corner, she doesn't

feel at home until she passes the "Welcome to Oconee County" sign.

"It is a special place, and it has always been, and it will continue to be," she said. "It has a special population, a hard-working population, people who built these communities who were children of the Depression, who stared down Nazi tyranny in the Second World War to return and build their lives here. That is who we are."

People from a small town often understand things that "may not be obvious to everyone," Gonzales said, which includes knowing each person has an obligation that extends beyond themselves.

"You have a duty to serve, you have a duty to engage, you have a spirit of community that is almost palpable," she said. "And you know the only way, the absolutely only way, that 'together towards tomorrow' is predicated on 'together.' We're going to do this together because that's what we've always done."

'WORTH INVESTING IN'

Gonzales spoke fondly of the German, Scottish and Irish immigrants who made their way from Charleston up to the land beside the water and her own family's



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Development for Oconee Economic Alliance Director for Community Outreach and

connection to the area, and then touched on her experiences with other communities during her time with the military.

"I have moved 23 times in my life as a military officer. I know something about moving, and I know something about community.

And I'm telling you, what you have here is not what everyone experiences here," she said. "Savor it, make it happen.

"Of course you will be successful, of course it will work, of course revenue will come," she added. "You have a workforce

that works. You have a community that's committed, you have education that is available for all, and you are expanding, because you know that we are a community worth investing in."