

2020 Strategic Planning Report

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For tomorrow
belongs to the
people who
prepare for it
today

- African Proverb

A Brief History of Oconee County

Oconee County, located in the northwest corner of South Carolina on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, takes its name from a Cherokee word meaning “land beside the water”. The County was formed in 1868 when the State legislature divided Pickens District into Pickens and Oconee Counties.

Native Americans lived here for thousands of years, and this area was home to the Cherokee. Their villages were located near water, good hunting grounds and tillable land. Dwellings in the Cherokee villages were houses not unlike the rustic homes of early European settlers. They farmed hundreds of acres of corn in the rich land along the rivers and maintained peach and apple orchards. During Colonial time the Cherokee were allies and trading partners with the British. They had an extensive trading network including a trading path that extended from Charleston to the Mississippi River and intersected other paths at the Cherokee “lower town” of Keowee. The main path also went through Oconee Town and crossed Oconee Mountain (formerly known as Station Mountain). The British built Fort Prince George across the Keowee River from Keowee Town to protect the Cherokee and the important trade paths.

It was the Cherokee’s choice to side with the British during the Revolutionary War, which led to the destruction of their Lower Towns and the loss of most of their tribal land in the Upstate in the Treaty of DeWitt’s Corner in 1777. They sold the remainder of their tribal land in South Carolina in the Treaty of 1816, but were not forced to leave and many of their descendants live here today. The Cherokee cultural legacy has become an integral part of our County’s heritage.

Following the Revolutionary War, veterans and settlers from other parts of the State began moving in, including a small group of Germans under the leadership of General John A. Wagener and the German Colonization Society of Charleston, South Carolina, who founded and settled the town of Walhalla in 1850. Today, Walhalla serves as the County seat.

A number of Irishmen came to Stumphouse Mountain in the mid-1850’s to build the Blue Ridge Railroad that was chartered to connect Charleston with the Midwest. Economic reasons and the Civil War caused the project to fail to meet completion. Stumphouse Tunnel is today a tourist attraction on the National Register of Historic Places.

After the Civil War, the Richmond and Air Line Railroad (now the Southern Railroad) was built through Oconee County, and the present towns of Seneca and Westminster came into being. Large textile mills were built in the Upstate in the 1890’s, with Newry in southeast Oconee County remaining as one of the earliest, least-altered textile villages in South Carolina.

As Oconee County welcomed in the new century, textile manufacturing expanded, lumber mills prospered, and agricultural enterprises, such as dairy farms and commercial apple orchards, contributed to the County’s economy. By 1960, the County’s economy was becoming more diverse with the opening of the Torrington Company, set to manufacture

precision needles, and the plans of Duke Energy to construct electrical energy projects in the County that would ultimately create Lakes Keowee and Jocassee, as well as a nuclear energy facility.

Oconee County continues to be a strong contender in the national and global marketplace. Today, the County's economic diversity can be attributed to a number of high-tech manufacturers that employ a well trained work force able to meet the needs of business and industry. Tourism now plays a vital role in the County's economy, as tourists visit many local and state parks, historical sites, and take part in recreation that includes hiking, waterfall viewing, rafting, and other nature-based activities.

Quality of life in Oconee County is excellent, as measured based on the social and economic environment provided by our freedoms, happiness, material well-being, environmental health, and community life factors. The citizens of Oconee County are committed to fostering economic growth while protecting the natural beauty of the County.



Top Left to Right: White Waterfalls, The Old Seneca Depot; Bottom Left to Right: The Old Jail and Kenneth Mill; Provided by Oconee History Museum

Oconee County

Community Profile

Established - 1868

County Seat - City of Walhalla

Form of Government - Council, Administrator

Climate

Average January Low	29.8 F
Average July High	89.1 F
Average Annual Rainfall	56.00"
Average Annual Snowfall	2.20"

Population by Municipality (2016)

Salem	149
Seneca	8,228
Walhalla	4,263
West Union	305
Westminster	2,482

Population Trends and Projections

2000	66,215
2010	74,342
2015	76,600
2020	78,900
2025	84,000
2030	91,000
2035	95,000

Components of Population Change

	<u>2000-2009</u>	<u>2010-2018</u>
Births	7,501	6,920
Deaths	6,455	7,851
Net Migration	4,633	4,633

Median Age (2017)

Population Density	118.6	United States	38.2 years
Population Density per Square Mile		South Carolina	39.1 years
		Oconee County	44.7 years

Age Composition (2017)

<u>Age</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Under 5 Years	5.30%
5 to 9 Years	5.60%
10 to 14 Years	5.90%
15 to 19 Years	5.60%
20 to 24 Years	5.90%
25 to 34 Years	11.10%
35 to 44 Years	10.70%
45 to 54 Years	12.90%
55 to 59 Years	7.10%
60 to 64 Years	8.00%
65 to 74 Years	13.30%
75 to 84 Years	6.40%
85 Years & Older	1.70%

Gender Composition (2017)

Males	38,403	49%
Females	39,971	51%

Elections

Registered Voters	49,509
Number of Voters-Last General Election	27,860
Percentage Voting	56.27%
Voter Precincts	31
Number of Representatives-State	2
Number of Senators-State	2

Housing Characteristics (2017)

Total Housing Units	39,753
Total Homeownership rate	72.9%
Median Value of Owner-Occupied	153,300
Persons per Household	2.4
Median Household Income	\$43,973

Overview of Oconee County and Our Government

Oconee County

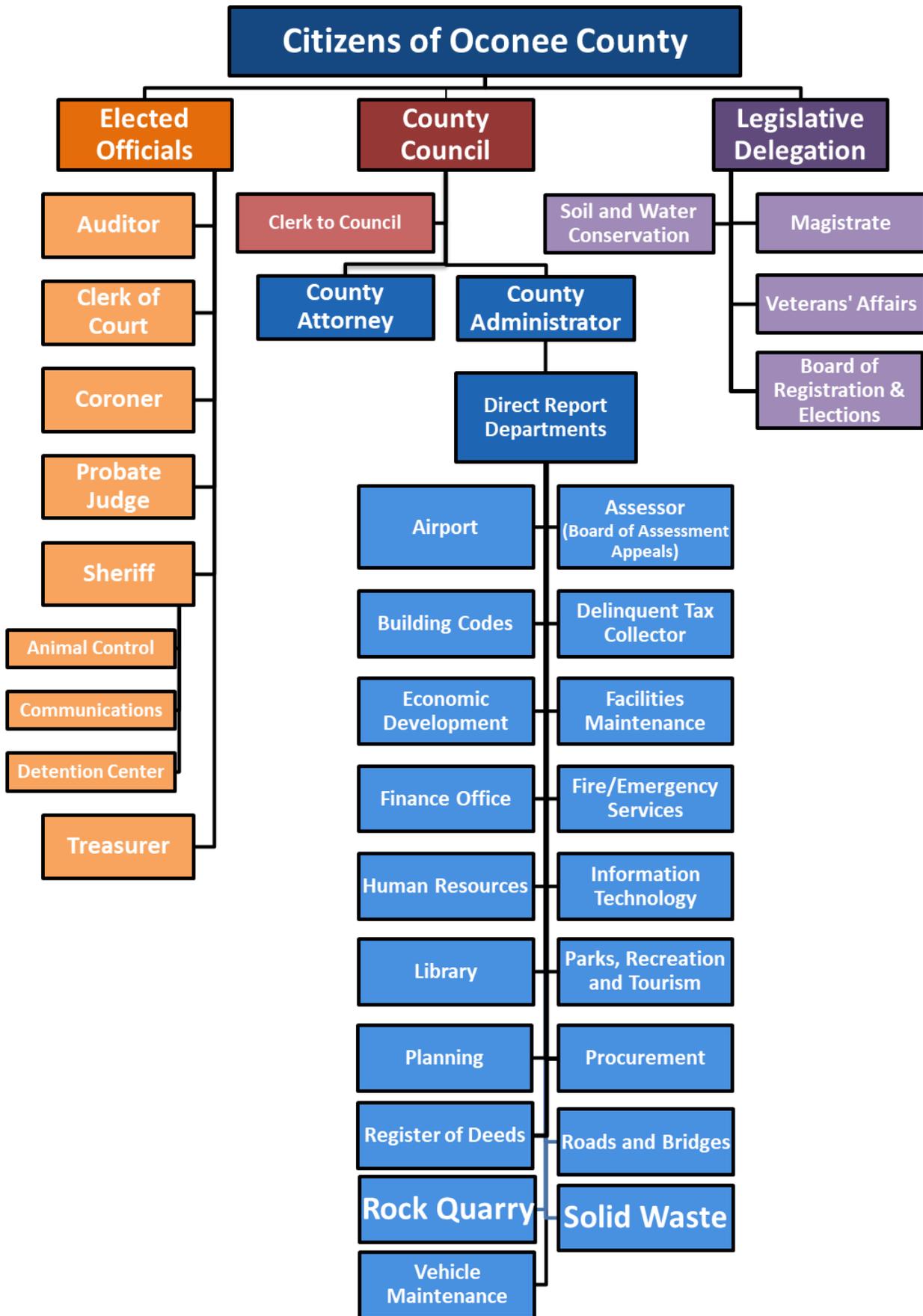
- **Oconee’s Seal** symbolizes Oconee’s rich Native American history. “Oconee” (Ae-quo-nee) is an ancient Cherokee word meaning “land beside the water.” The design of the seal reflects the Native American symbols for “land” and “water.” The green, upper part of the design is the symbol for mountain while the blue, lower part of the design is the symbol for water – representative of the five main rivers of Oconee: Chattooga, Chauga, Tugaloo, Keowee and Seneca. The blood-red ring around the design in the traditional Cherokee “circle of life” connecting all living things.



- **Called “The Golden Corner”**, Oconee County is located in an area known as the “Upstate of South Carolina.”
- **The land area** of Oconee County is 625.41 square miles.
- **The geography** plays host to significant environmental resources:
 - Sumter National Forest
 - Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area
 - Jocassee Gorge Wilderness Area
 - Campgrounds
 - State and County Parks:
 - Chau Ram County Park
 - High Falls County Park
 - South Cove County Park
 - Devils Fork State Park
 - Lake Hartwell State Park
 - Oconee State Park
 - Oconee Station State Park
 - Coneross Campground
 - Oconee Point
 - Stumphouse Tunnel /Issaqueena Falls Park
 - Rivers:
 - Chauga River
 - Chattooga River
 - Whitewater River
 - Little River

- Major Lakes:
 - Lake Jocassee
 - Lake Keowee
 - Lake Hartwell
- **Oconee County is home** to five (5) municipalities:
 - Town of Salem
 - City of Seneca
 - City of Walhalla (County Seat)
 - Town of West Union
 - City of Westminster
- **Oconee County adjoins 10 other counties in 3 states:** Anderson and Pickens in South Carolina; Jackson, Transylvania and Macon in North Carolina; and Rabun, Habersham, Stephens, Franklin and Hart in Georgia.





Form of Government:

- The Council – Administrator form of professional government was approved by voter referendum in November, 2003. Oconee County was formerly under the Council – Elected Supervisor form of government.

County Council:

- Five (5) officials are elected from single-member districts for staggered four-year terms.
- Oconee County’s Council Members:

District I	Mr. John Elliott
District II	Mr. Wayne McCall
District III	Mr. Paul A. Cain, Esq.
District IV	Mr. Julian Davis III
District V	Mr. James Glenn Hart

Other County Elected Officials:

- Clerk of Court, Beverly Whitfield
- Coroner, Karl E. Addis
- County Auditor, Christy Hubbard
- County Treasurer, Greg Nowell
- Probate Judge, Kenneth E. Johns, Jr.
- Sheriff, Michael Crenshaw
- Solicitor, David Wagner

Oconee County Legislative Delegation:

State Senator, South Carolina District #1
The Honorable Thomas C. Alexander

State Representative, South Carolina District #1
The Honorable William R. Whitmire

State Representative, South Carolina District #2
The Honorable William R. (Bill) Sandifer, III

United States Congressman:

South Carolina’s 3rd Congressional District
The Honorable Jeff Duncan

United States Senators:

The Honorable Lindsey O. Graham
The Honorable Timothy E. (Tim) Scott

Services to Citizens

Oconee County provides a broad spectrum and scope of services to include:

- **Community & Citizen Services** – Oconee Regional Airport; Assessor; Auditor; Building Codes; Delinquent Tax Office; Legislative Delegation; four Oconee County Library Branches; Parks, Recreation and Tourism; Planning and Zoning; Register of Deeds; Rock Quarry; Voter Services through Registration and Elections; Treasurer’s Office; and Veterans Affairs
- **Judicial Services** – Clerk of Court; Solicitor; three Magistrate Courts; and Probate Court
- **Law Enforcement and Public Safety** – Oconee County Sheriff’s Office – Detention Center; Animal Control; Animal Shelter; Coroner; Emergency Services Division; and Rural Fire
- **Public Works and Facility Services** – Building and Facilities Maintenance; Roads and Bridges; Solid Waste; and Vehicle Maintenance
- **Administrative Services** – Economic Development; Finance; Human Resources; Information Technology; and Procurement

Oconee County’s success is due to EACH and EVERY department’s commitment, dedication and diligence.

Strategic Planning

For the past several years, County Council and Administration have held a Strategic Planning Retreat to review the previous year's accomplishments, establish goals for the upcoming year, and prioritize longer term goals in preparation for the future.

The Oconee County Strategic Planning Retreat was held on Tuesday, February 11, 2020. During the retreat, Finance Director, Ladale Price, presented the Annual Budget Update, followed by the 2019 Year in Review, presented by County Administrator, Amanda Brock.

The 2019 Year in Review provided updates on completed and ongoing County projects, including improvements at the Oconee Regional Airport, Seneca Library, Chau Ram, High Falls and South Cove County Parks, and the Rock Quarry.

In 2019, Several major economic development announcements included a total of approximately \$37.7 million of new capital investments and the creation of 147 new jobs in Oconee County. Economic development of the County industrial parks continued, including road and water and sewer infrastructure improvements at the Seneca Rail Site and road improvements at the Oconee Industry & Technology Park.

County Council discussed strategic goals for each district and Oconee County as a whole. This discussion revealed a primary focus on improving the quality of life for the citizens, residents and visitors in Oconee County. Strategic planning initiatives were ranked based on Council member comments and further discussion.

Below is the list of goals established during the 2020 Strategic Planning Retreat:

Tier I

Phase II Sewer South to I-85 Exits 1,2 & 4	Airport Improvements
Bountyland Traffic Study	Solid Waste / Recycling
Bountyland Fire Substation	Litter Education and Remediation

Tier II

Utica Revitalization	Affordable Healthcare
Corridor Plans	

Tier III

Establishment of Greenways	Annual Staff Investment
Industrial Property Westminster Area	Fair Play School
OEA Office Relocation	Fair Play Fire Department
Technology Incubator	High Falls Expansion / PRT
Increase Fund Balance	Additional Sheriff Office Personnel

With direction and guidance from County Council, Administration and Oconee County staff will work diligently over the next fiscal year to accomplish the strategic goals and exceed the expectations of Council and our citizens. The following sections provide a comprehensive reflection on what we, as a County, will strive to do to address the strategic goals as outlined by Council.

Tier I Strategic Initiatives

Tier I initiatives were identified by three or more Council members as priorities during the Strategic Planning Retreat. These projects will receive primary funding consideration over the next 1 - 3 fiscal years.

Phase II Sewer South Expansion to Exits 1, 2 & 4: In 2019, Oconee County entered into an Intergovernmental Agreement with Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority for the extension of the Sewer South System to I-85 Exits 1 & 2. Oconee County will continue to work with OJRSA, monitor progress and research funding opportunities for the continued expansion of the sewer system to I-85 Exit 4.

Bountyland Traffic Study: Administration and staff will initiate necessary studies to identify areas of Bountyland which have consistent traffic congestion and determine the best course of action, if any, to improve traffic flow.

Bountyland Fire Substation: Oconee County earmarked approximately \$400,000 for the establishment of a Bountyland Fire Substation and purchased 1.9 acres of undeveloped property on South Cove Road. Concerns were raised regarding traffic congestion going to and from the proposed site. County Council and Administration will continue to discuss potential locations for the substation and conduct the necessary studies to bring this plan to fruition.

Airport Improvements: In 2019, the County worked closely with the Federal Aviation Administration and South Carolina Aeronautics Commission for the purchase of land adjacent to the airport, terminal apron expansion design services, and engineering services for the relocation Mt. Nebo Church Road. The County proceeded with crack sealing and pavement remarking on runway 7/25 and the taxiway. County Council would like to continue with projects according to the Oconee County Regional Airport Capital Improvement Plan. In Fiscal Year 2021-2022, the County airport intends to focus on runway pavement and airfield lighting rehabilitation, provided that funding from outside agencies is available to offset the costs. Airport improvements are crucial to accommodate increased traffic and larger aircraft.

Solid Waste / Recycling: Oconee County Administration presented the Solid Waste Disposal Evaluation to Council on November 19, 2019. The study evaluated incineration, conversion and handling methods for municipal solid waste. County Council directed the Administrator and staff to receive pricing for a glass crusher plant and further investigate incineration technologies and class three waste processing facilities. Oconee County continues to search for additional solid waste and recycling opportunities and intends to designate funding for these purposes in the upcoming fiscal year.

Litter Control, Education and Awareness: County Council recognizes the importance of litter control and instructed staff to look at increased penalties and alternative handling methods for recycling. Oconee County will continue to educate residents and raise awareness within schools and local communities. County Council requested Administration and staff look at the possibility of expanding the local litter task force. The Oconee County Sheriff's Office will continue to advocate to local restaurants to add trash receptacles along drive-thru routes and utilize inmate labor to pick up and dispose of litter.

Tier II Strategic Initiatives

Tier II initiatives were listed by two Council members as priorities during the Strategic Planning Retreat. Many of these projects are ongoing or currently underway and will remain on the priority list until they reach a measurable level of completion.

Utica Revitalization: Oconee County will continue to look for opportunities to remove derelict structures in the Utica community and work with state and federal agencies for opportunity zone / revitalization funding opportunities. Oconee County will look at potential incentives which may be used to encourage developers to focus within the opportunity zone.

Corridor Plans: In 2019, Oconee County engaged Alta Planning + Design to look in to creating a corridor plan for Highway 123 between the City of Seneca and the Oconee County border with Pickens County. County Council would like to take this project further by creating a county-wide corridor plan which focuses on areas of business development and increased traffic.

Healthcare: County Council believes all citizens and residents in Oconee County have the right to affordable healthcare and access to medical assistance. Council requested Administration and staff look into opportunities for the development of a healthcare facility in Oconee County.

Tier III Strategic Initiatives

Tier I initiatives were identified as a priority by one Council member and may be specific to a district. These projects are typically short-term and voted on by County Council as funding opportunities become available.

Oconee County will continue to invest in economic development and parks, recreation and tourism. The demolition of the Fair Play school would remove a blight in the Fair Play area and pave the way for increased fire services.

County Council would like to discuss an annual investment into the staff of Oconee County. The allotted percentage would primarily cover cost of living increases experienced by the staff and bring salaries up to be more competitive with similar positions in outside agencies. Council also directed Administration and staff to develop a plan for increased personnel at the Oconee County Sheriff's Office.

Summary

In closing, I would personally like to thank the Oconee County Council, elected officials and Oconee County employees for the job they do for this County, our citizens and our visitors. As is obvious in this report, we have come a long way in accomplishing the goals set forth by Council. This can be attributed to the commitment we've made.

Administration, while focused on Council's prioritized goals outlined above, remains diligent in its efforts to maintain optimum efficiency and improve service throughout the entire organization.

Over the last year, we've had a lot of "irons in the fire." I'm extremely proud of and amazed at what the Oconee Team has been able to accomplish. I recognize we still face significant challenges, as every organization does, but seeing how far we have come only solidifies my belief that this County can and will continue its success.

While Administration is the management arm of County government, it takes every person in the organization to make the County operate efficiently and successfully. Every member of the Oconee Team plays a vital role in the services we provide, and our successes are a result of the diligent and efficient work performed by every member of Team Oconee.

To our Council, I am grateful for the insight and vision each of you has, and for the leadership you provide. The goals and objectives you have set define the priority of this Council: a better way of life for all Oconeeans.

While facing the challenges of the day-to-day, we have managed to keep an eye on the future, and have continued to utilize every asset to the best of our ability to continue on this path of success. I am extremely proud of what this organization has achieved, and I know we can keep this momentum going.

I am proud of what we have done.

I am committed to what we are doing.

I am incredibly excited about where we are going.

Amanda F. Brock
Administrator
Submitted on March 3, 2020