

Macon County Welcome Center Nears Completion

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

The new Leon and Marie Cothron Macon County Welcome Center, located at 685 Hwy. 52 By Pass West, is nearing completion in Lafayette. It's hard to believe this beautiful 4,000 square foot project officially began over five years ago, in 2003, when then Chamber President Phillip Baker, appointed Paul Thompson to chair the Chamber's Long Term Planning Committee.

Leanne Whittemore and Bryan West, fellow committee members, joined Thompson and Baker in setting goals for the Chamber, including a new Welcome Center.

In 2004, when Thompson's tenure as Chamber President began, he moved forward with the process of seeking funds for a Welcome Center, with the Chamber Board of Directors in agreement.

"Applications were submitted to both the USDA and TDOT for grants," said Thompson. "It took two tries for the TDOT grant, and Congressman Bart Gordon contributed by securing \$160,000 in Federal Transportation funds."

When Thompson submitted a second USDA enhancement grant on behalf of the Chamber, he said a total of \$510,000 in grant monies was received by the County for the Leon and Marie Cothron Macon County Welcome Center.

"The site search for the project intensified in 2006, with several possible locations identified and prioritized," explained Thompson. "The committee's recommendation was to find a site located on Highway 52 West and the top choice was a portion of the Cothron farm near the Lafayette Municipal Airport."

"After presenting the Welcome Center plans to Michael and Marie Cothron, they offered to sell approximately one acre of farm land to Macon County for \$10,000 (the land appraised for \$137,000) for construction of the center."

The Cothron's generosity certainly paid off for Macon County, when TDOT approved using the appraised value of the land as the local match.

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“Following the successful site selection, TDOT’s mandated protocol was followed in advertising for engineering service,” Thompson continued. “The project was discussed with a local engineering firm and they were encouraged to submit a letter of interest but chose not to do so.”

“After narrowing the field of those who did submit letters of interest, formal presentations were given by three engineering firms and Palmer Engineering (the low bidder) was selected for the project.”

Thompson submitted both the original (official) building plan and the alternate to President Janice Gammons and the Chamber Board of Directors, for consideration.

“The Chamber Board selected the plan that has now been constructed,” Thompson stated, “and the Chamber approved plan, was submitted to state and federal agencies and sent to MJM Architects for design.”

“The Macon County Historical Society was allotted space in the original grant applications,” noted Thompson, “but controversy arose when an individual presented the Historical Society with an unofficial, unapproved plan that gave them an increased amount of square footage.”

The bid opening was set for July 14, 2008, after TDOT gave the final approval. All information was submitted to the department and after they reviewed the bids, the contract was awarded to Steve Coates Construction, in Westmoreland, who was the low bidder.

“The Leon and Marie Cothron Macon County Welcome Center will become the new home of the Chamber of Commerce upon completion,”

Thompson said, “and will also provide space to the Macon County Historical Society, as well as a large community room for meetings and other events. In addition, the Macon County Arts Council will display items throughout the building.”

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“There are still a few things to be done at the center, before we move in,” added Chamber of Commerce Secretary, Lona Vinson, “the asphalt has to be finished and parking spaces marked off. If the weather holds up we’re hoping to be in sometime during the next couple of weeks.”