An unofficial weekend kickoff

Weekly Jazz on the Alley series starts Thursday

BY CHRISTINA CLEVELAND
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — More than 20 years ago, when Seneca events coordinator Riley Johnson worked in the City of Greenville, officials were thinking of ways to attract downtown business and began hosting more festivals and events.

Johnson was also there when the city began to boom and things kept getting bigger. Now, Greenville doesn't appear to have much of problem getting people to flock to its bustling downtown.

But Seneca isn't Greenville, Johnson said. It is more of a relaxing retirement area, offering something a bit different, he said.

While at Seneca, Johnson introduced Jazz On the Alley — a concept he grew out of a similar event called Downtown Live.

Johnson said Seneca is now in the fifth full year of Jazz on the Alley, which hosts hundreds of locals and visitors each week. Beginning this Thursday and every Thursday through October, Seneca will host the event on Ram Cat Alley from 6:30-9 p.m.

The event features American jazz groups while generating business for downtown shops and local restaurants.

"That's their big night," Johnson said. "It used to be a bonus, but now it's their go-to night. It has turned into that."

Stuart Pohl, owner of The Spot on the Alley, called Jazz "almost the busiest night of the week" for his business. Thursdays are actually now better than Fridays, according to Pohl, who said last year was his best year since opening in 2000.

"I think part of it is the downtown events," he said. "(Jazz) has introduced a ton of people to our restaurant that I don't think otherwise would know we exist, so that's been a big plus, too."

Rob and Reana's Jewelers is one of the businesses that stays open during the event. Owner Rob Perry said he and his wife easily see around 50 people during Jazz events, and many have become return customers.

"We're always excited for Jazz," Perry said. "We look forward to it every week. We have plenty of people who come in and say, 'Oh I saw this at Jazz on the Alley,' and they'll come a lot of times during Jazz and put things on their wish list for when special occasions come up. We have a lot of return business from Jazz."

Though the ladies at the Sewing Basket across the street have decided not to open their doors during the event, store employee Donna Manley and owner Debbie Murphy said just folks peering at their displays gets them curious enough.

"People see stuff in our window and come back," Manley said, adding the store has also been able to garner some out-of-town business due to its unique dresses and quilts.

On Tuesday, city workers were hoisting up the sign above the street, which is blocked off during the event for tables, chairs and a stage for live bands.

Johnson couldn't say exactly how many people attend Jazz each week, but said the city puts out more than 200 chairs and 20 tables, and "they're all full."

The Spot puts out its own set of chairs and tables, as does nearby J Peters, which Johnson said bumps the crowd up to anywhere from 250 to 500 people.

Thursday night's opening band is Atlanta-based group Funk Factory 5, which performs cover songs from a variety of musical genres including jazz, rock, rhythm and blues, beach and country. It's also Sure Shot night, and the downtown firearm store will offer prizes during the event. Strickland RV and Marine is also slated to attend and will display one of its boats.

"We're expecting big crowds," Johnson said. "It's kind of a kickoff to spring, and we're excited about it. Everybody that comes down here, a lot of them come just for the camaraderie with their friends, and it's just a point to go to Thursday night.

"It's unofficially the kickoff to every weekend — that's what everybody tells me, and they love it."

In addition, Seneca's Cruzin' on Main will begin on Saturday and will be held the first Saturday of every month — excluding June — due to Seneca Fest.

For an event flyer that includes April's scheduled bands, visit www.seneca.sc.us/Events/JazzontheAlley.

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Funk Factory 5, seen here performing last year at Seneca's Jazz on the Alley, will be back in town Thursday to help the city kick off this year's weekly events.