City of Pickens awarded grants for beginning of bike project

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PICKENS — After five years of application processes, the city of Pickens was finally awarded two federally funded grants recently: a $100,000 grant from the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and a $400,000 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

"These grants are extremely competitive," said Pickens city administrator Katherine Brackett. "The PRT grant is a statewide grant and the ARC grant covers the entire Appalachian region, which encompasses several states."

Brackett says the city is honored and excited to be the recipients of these funds. Using additional funds from the city's hospitality tax, approximately $800,000 of funding will be used toward implementing the initial phases of the Town Creek Park Master Plan. The master plan and other information is available through the city of Pickens website at www.cityofpickens.net.

Town Creek Park, located next to the Playground of Promise, is seated on a 100-acre parcel of land owned by the city of Pickens. With this recently awarded grant funding, the park will be transformed into one of the premier off-road bicycling facilities in Upstate South Carolina.

Located just one mile from historic downtown Pickens, the park will serve as the first of three anchor destinations within the proposed Pickens-Easley-Liberty Corridor (PELCOR).

The PELCOR is a proposed loop and series of bicycle-friendly trails, roads, parks and riding destinations located in the Upstate of South Carolina that encompasses a 17-square-mile triangular area including the cities of Pickens, Easley, and Liberty.

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Within the PELCOR, bicycle riders of all types (road, mountain bike, and BMX) and skill levels (beginner, advanced, and expert) will find various destinations that accommodate their bicycling ambitions. Primary goals of PELCOR are to improve wellness, enhance family, and further knowledge and appreciation of the local communities while contributing to economic growth and prosperity.

Ride Garden, LLC, is partnering with the city of Pickens to revitalize Town Creek Park as the initial PELCOR facility.

Brackett says that the main project of focus at Town Creek Park is the Appalachian Lumber Trail (ALT). The ALT is an old rail line that was once a fully operational railway system running through Pickens.

"It provides a nice, natural trail bed," said Brackett. "The plan is to use the existing rail line and create a 10-12-foot wide paved path, much like parts of the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville. The trail will be multi-use and wheel chair accessible."

One of the more unique features of Town Creek Park will be the construction of a "pump coaster," which Brackett says is similar to an obstacle course for mountain bikers and more skilled riders.

"Because it will be the only course of its kind in the Upstate, it will bring people here from the outside," said Brackett. "We want to develop an experience for people visiting the Upstate, something they can do for four or five hours. After, they can visit downtown to eat and shop, which brings money into our economy."

In addition to the "pump coaster," a variety of other hiking and walking trails in Town Creek Park will be rehabilitated so they don't deteriorate over time or succumb to the elements the way some of them have.

Because the project is being funded through federal grants, Town Creek Park will have to undergo several more studies before projects can begin so that any historical elements in the area can be properly preserved.

Once these studies have been completed, Brackett says the land is shovel-ready for the initial phases of the master plan to be put into place. She estimates that work on Town Creek Park will probably begin in January 2013.

"It takes a lot of working together to make Pickens and the rest of the upstate a destination where people want to visit. These grants are the catalyst we needed to move forward," said Brackett. "All the stars seemed to align perfectly, or the city would have waited to embark on this project."

While there is a group of residents throughout Pickens County who have voiced opposition to multi-modal trails in the county, Brackett says she has only heard excitement from local business owners, council members and other people who serve on the committees and attend public meetings pertaining to these developments.

The city of Easley was also awarded $75,000 in grant funding from the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. City administrator Fox Simons said the funds will go toward continued development of the Brushy Creek Greenway in Easley.