Destination Oconee manager to visit signage sites

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
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SENECA — Destination Oconee strategy manager Janet Hartman and a contractor will visit sites designated for future gateway signage in Oconee County today.

Hartman and the contractor will evaluate spots off S.C. Highway 11 and U.S. 123 near the border of Pickens County. Hartman said at a recent Destination Oconee Action committee meeting that the S.C. Department of Transportation approved permits for the projects.

"We have received final approval on encroachment permits from the DOT," Hartman said at the Oconee Economic Alliance headquarters in Seneca. "We have all the permitting and everything that's needed from (Oconee County), so we're good to go. Any of you who want to join me, we're going out to both sites."

The Journal reported in September that the theme for the signs will be a modified version of the design proposed by the Destination Oconee plans, which recommended funding signage with grants.

The South Carolina National Heritage Corridor and S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism each provided grants in the amount of $37,000 for a total of $74,000.

County administrator Scott Moulder told county council in September the Destination Oconee committee made recommendations as to the location and appearance of the signs.

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"They took the Destination Oconee document and the illustrations that went along with that, made some modifications to them — the rock is actually a flat rock (that is) grouted out rather than a stacked rock as you saw on the Destination Oconee plan, so the face of it has actually got a flat rock on it, which is more indigenous to our area," Moulder said. "It's very similar to the features at some of our state parks with regard to their structures."

The sign on U.S. 123 was bid out at roughly $43,000, while the sign on S.C. 11 was bid at about $33,000. JF Contractors of Sumter won the bid at $76,000 over Rite Lite Signs Inc., of Concord, N.C., which bid $147,000.

Moulder confirmed in September council would accept $2,201 from Oconee Economic Alliance for the remaining balance.

The Destination Oconee final plan listed signage as part of an effort to grow Oconee County. The plan called for gateway signage at major thoroughfares with a "rustic elegance" design.

"Conduct a condition assessment of the public access, structures and signage at lakes, waterfalls, rivers, scenic vistas and other key attractions," the plan recommended. "Develop a plan for improving public access and experiences."

Hartman gave an overview at the meeting of the action committee's progress in implementing the plan's recommendations in 2016. And implementing marketing strategies like gateway signage plays a crucial role, according to Hartman, in carrying out those recommendations.

"We're promoting the 'Think Oconee' brand and use of the logo so people have that feeling of, 'I know I'm in Oconee County because I've seen this,'" Hartman said. "That sense of place is created."

Hartman told the committee that the DOT asked the alliance to move the sign placement on S.C. 11 "back slightly." The DOT said the stakes stood too close to the bridge that DOT employees would need access to for maintenance and repairs.

Hartman added that the alliance designated additional spots for gateway signage that will also be funded through grants and matching grants.

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

These renderings show planned gateway signs on U.S. Highway 123 (above) and on S.C. 11 (below) near Oconee County's border with Pickens.