

Great Outdoors Center to add veterans' wellness component

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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SENECA — Combat veterans and their families could one day have an idyllic haven for rest and recreation in Oconee if a proposal to add a veterans' wellness component to the S.C. Great Outdoors Center project at Sanctuary Pointe pans out.

The South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, organizer of the Great Outdoors Center, announced it is partnering with a veterans' organization — WhenLifeSucks.org — to include programs and activities that provide therapy and healing to veterans, many of whom are dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.

S.C. National Heritage Corridor president Michelle McCollum said adding space to the Great Outdoors concept to include the needs of veterans helped by WhenLifeSucks.org "is the right thing to do."

Pointing to alarming statistics showing that an average of 22 veterans a day commit suicide and that more post-9/11 vets have died by suicide than in combat, McCollum said PTSD is a growing epidemic that can't be ignored.

"We are honored to have them at the table," McCollum said.

Tim Wiles founded WhenLifeSucks.org after working with a company that offered wellness coaching and leadership development for corporate clients, individuals and military veterans.

"There is no doubt that PTSD has a negative effect on families in every area of life," Wiles said. "The emotional and spiritual impact is way more devastating than the numbers show."

When McCollum announced plans for the Great Outdoors Center earlier this year, it gave a big boost to the stymied Sanctuary Pointe Resort project on 325 acres at Lake Hartwell along the Georgia and South Carolina border at Exit 1 on Interstate 85.

The 75-acre Great Outdoors Center would be a component of the Sanctuary Pointe development that's struggled to advance its plans for hotels, a marina, a golf course, a restaurant and cabins. Sanctuary Pointe developers embraced McCollum's Great Outdoors Center initiative that would bring indoor and outdoor archery ranges, a lakeside pavilion, an adventure center pavilion with zip-lining, bike rental, visitor services, environmental education, classrooms, meeting space and a café.

Plans to incorporate a veterans' wellness center got the endorsement of state Sen. Thomas Alexander, R-Walhalla.

"I'm excited about these great partnerships that will not only benefit the citizens of South Carolina but will also serve our veterans and their families from across the country," Alexander said.

For the concept to become a reality, McCollum said it would need the support of the S.C. Department of

Parks, Recreation and Tourism and approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

SCPRT is leasing the 325-acre Sanctuary Pointe property from the U.S. Corps of Engineers and subleasing it to Sanctuary Pointe developers.

Under the terms of the sublease, the first phase of the Sanctuary Pointe project must be completed, or significant progress made, by the end of 2020.

"Once we receive approval from the Corps, we will immediately begin our capital campaign," McCollum said. "We are hopeful that the public and private sectors will be willing to step up and become partners in this endeavor to truly do something meaningful for our veterans."

McCollum told The Journal that SCPRT has provided a letter to Sanctuary Pointe supporting the Great Outdoors Center.

"The veterans wellness and renewal component will be another element at the GOC along with the other elements of educational programs, archery, and land and water recreational activities," she said.

McCollum said she had not spoken directly to SCPRT officials about the new partnership, but couldn't imagine why anyone would not be supportive of an initiative to help veterans.

"I'm confident that everyone involved will be excited about this new element to an already fabulous list of partners," she said.