County residents get more recreation options



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Workers build a a new waterpark at Northside Park in Greenville County. It is expected to open this summer

Greenville starts to see restaurant tax pay off

Nine projects done, more coming online although some needs remain

By Ben Szobody
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What was once a controversial new Greenville County tax now is a seldom-noticed part of the restaurant tab, but the revenue still is paying for a shifting roster of large-scale parks and, perhaps, Southwest Airlines.

At least nine of the 23 original projects placed strategically around the county and spelled out in restaurant tax laws are complete, including $1.1 million in upgrades to the Sterling Community Center and the 16-field MESA Soccer Complex, which got $3 million in initial tax funding.

The county Recreation District is in the middle of a string of grand openings, and a recent change in the once hotly debated tax law marks $1 million of the funds to help lure Southwest Airlines to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport — the first tax recipient that's not a park or community facility.

Meanwhile, executive director Gene Smith said the district has another $20 million in unmet capital needs and that he's likely to return with a proposal in the fall, though he told *The Greenville News* he's not yet sure what the proposal would look like.

The Southwest money would go into a reserve fund that the airline could draw if its local losses exceeded a set amount, said County Council Chairman Butch Kirven.

Southwest has yet to decide if it's coming to Greenville, and even if it does, the money's use would be unlikely, he said.

State Rep. Bill Wylie has floated state legislation that would create a fund of about $15 million to reimburse airline losses for up to 24 months.

The county portion was one of a handful of changes approved this month that will also send another $500,000 to MESA and $4.5 million for what county officials say are badly needed repairs and expansion at the Westside Aquatics Center.

Those funds were previously tagged for projects that didn't pan out at downtown's Kroc Center and

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the former Enoree Landfill.

Across the county, meanwhile, sports teams are descending on diamonds and pitches created by a tax that rode to council approval on the strength of hundreds of families, arts patrons and sports enthusiasts who lobbied for it even as some conservatives blasted the move as the biggest tax hike in at least 13 years.

A consultant's study had for years prescribed $100 million in recreation funding for the county, describing a region decades out of step with its population, but plans to fund the effort had imploded amidst protest and political debate.

What the tax of two cents on every dollar at restaurants in unincorporated areas of the county did, supporters say, is offload much of the cost to county visitors who happen to dine locally. It also created what Smith describes as an array of major complexes designed to lure tourists on weekends and serve residents during the week.

Three years in, about $40 million in Recreation District projects have or are taking shape, or about $51.7 million in total work.

Another $20 million to $25 million have come from other sources, Smith said.

Among the tax-funded projects now complete is the just-opened sports complex at Greenville Technical College's northwest campus, where $3.5 million in tax money helped fund an array of sports fields.

Construction of Camp Spearhead at Pleasant Ridge Park, a $12.5 million project that used $4 million in tax funding, is nearly complete, while the $1 million for a Taylors baseball complex at Corey Burns Park is spent.

The last of the county's new water parks, using $6 million in tax money, will be complete within weeks.

About $1 million in Pavilion upgrades will be done this summer. Lake Conestee's $2 million in trails and upgrades will be done this year. Parts of the Swamp Rabbit Trail are in use, and work will continue indefinitely as the system expands.

Slater Hall, the Sterling Community Center, David Jackson Park and Pelham Mill Falls Park are also done or virtually so, according to the Recreation District.

Renovation work has been done at the Blythe-Hagood House.

Independent projects completed include the Children's Theater and the Upcountry History Museum.

Still shy of construction are a baseball complex at the former Municipal Stadium, an outdoor adventure center, and the Piedmont Athletic Complex.

The Greater Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau's "GO" experience also received $5 million in restaurant tax money.

Councilwoman Xanthene Norris said it's a far cry from the days when paying for an ambitious slate of county amenities seemed a nonstarter.

Smith said the Recreation District now has roughly 50 facilities, including older ones that need upgrades and more work.

Tritium leak at Oconee Nuclear site still elusive

Duke says radioactive traces pose no threat; residents await answers

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The source of radioactive tritium in monitoring wells at Oconee Nuclear Station remains a mystery, and area residents are waiting for answers while workers are digging new test wells to narrow down the possibilities.

"I hope they monitor it closely," said Pickens County resident Marvin Buchanan, who lives on Lake Keowee and whose residential well was one of two where state health officials found radioactive materials above allowable limits in testing near the nuclear station in 2008.

While no tritium was detected in Buchanan's well — which later received a clean bill of health — the experience heightened his awareness of the impact a leak at the nuclear station could have on the water he and his family drink and on the lake that is a source of water and recreation for thousands in the Upstate.

Leaking radioactive tritium is a problem at more than a quarter of the nation's 104 nuclear facilities, said Pam Solo, founder and president of the

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BART BOATWRIGHT/STAFF /

Marvin Buchanan stands by the well in his yard on Lake Keowee in Six Mile. The well was tested for radiation by DHEC a couple of years ago.

LEAK

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Civil Society Institute, a nonprofit and nonpartisan think tank.

Small amounts of tritium within allowable federal limits are released from every nuclear power plant as part of the normal process, said Roger Hannah, a Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman.

In addition, underground pipes have developed leaks at a number of plants, Hannah said. To this point, the leaks are below regulatory limits and deemed to be of "low safety significance."

"All available information shows no threat to the public," according to a statement posted on the NRC Web site. The NRC is reviewing the situation "to ensure nuclear plant operators have taken appropriate action and to determine what, if any, changes are needed to the agency's rules and regulations."

Sandra Magee, a Duke Energy spokeswoman, said the tritium found earlier this year in two of 54 monitoring wells at Oconee on the shore of Lake Keowee "is very isolated to a specific area" and poses no health risk to workers or the public.

"We want to find the source of the problem and take care of it," she said.

There's "no indication" the contamination "has migrated" to the ground water or any drinking water supply on or off the plant property, she said.

Even as Duke investigation the source of the problem here, public outcry over a tritium leak at a Vermont nuclear plant spurred state lawmakers to oppose renewal of the plant's operating license, which expires in 2012.

Unlike the situation at Vermont Yankee, where the Vermont Department of Health has found tritium levels as high as 2.5 million picocuries per liter, tritium found in the two Oconee samples was "just above the reporting threshold," Magee said.

The two Oconee samples came from monitoring wells between the turbine building and the switch yard at Oconee and showed tritium levels at 24,400 picocuries and 35,400 picocuries, Magee said.

The South Carolina and federal drinking water standard is 20,000 picocuries per liter, which is a "first trigger" to alert the state Department of