Last Ride brings cyclists, 'terrific economic impact'

BY JOSIE RABBITT
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WALHALLA — For mountain biking enthusiast Ken Sloan, Issaqueena's Last Ride is one ride he has never participated in — probably because he is too busy coordinating the 32-mile, 61-mile and 100-mile trailways that appeal to all types of riders.

As executive director of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, Sloan works to coordinate events that spotlight the county, from golf tournaments to bike rides.

The 17th annual Issaqueena's Last Ride will begin Saturday at 9 a.m. in the parking lot of St. John's Lutheran Church, located at 301 West Main St. in Walhalla.

"We've got more than 200 riders registered this year," Sloan said. "Participants from all over come in to experience this ride — the most popular being the 100-mile ride. Riders from Texas and Florida and all over come. They're a committed group of people who love bike rides."

With the race split into three rides — beginners ride at 32 miles, the 61-mile ride offers a moderate challenge and the 100-mile ride loops on back roads from Walhalla through Salem to Whitewater Falls and back — Sloan said the average the race averages a little more than 150 riders each year.

"This year is on the high end of that, at 200-plus registered, as the weather is expected to be sunny with blue skies," Sloan said.

Volunteers from St. John's Lutheran Church wake up early to prepare a "big layout of food," according to Sloan, which starts with a high-protein breakfast and ends with a special soup and hot dog dinner.

"The ladies and members of the church get there early to set up a spread of baked goods and juices for the riders," Sloan said. "It's a thoughtful gesture and a high-protein help in the morning for riders as they begin the 6,000 feet combined elevation climb on their bikes."

As riders in all three races trek through valleys and up South Carolina's mountainous terrain on the trails that Sloan has picked out, they can stop and rest at numerous mapped rest stops.

"Walmart partners with us to provide peanut butter sandwiches, bananas, other protein snacks and electrolytes at the stops," Sloan said. "We take care of all who ride with us and are grateful to have them as partners."

When the last riders come in, Sloan said the church members at St. John's Lutheran will have a collard green soup with ham and black-eyed peas ready for dinner.

"It's a soup that has everyone asking for the recipe," Sloan said. "It's great to have all these volunteers, as this helps the event operate basically free for the county. It's no money out of our pockets to put this event on, except for sponsorships. It doesn't cost Oconee County a thing."

Thanks to the large volume of riders who participate in the ride and stay overnight, Sloan said Issaqueena's Last Ride always has a "terrific economic impact" on the county.

"It's great because Safe Harbor is our beneficiary, and this means we can donate more to them," Sloan said, "This year we are expecting to give them $5,000."

Over the past 17 years, Issaqueena's Last Ride has given Safe Harbor more than $12,000, according to Sloan.

"It's a fantastic event with wonderful sponsors and a great beneficiary," Sloan said. "If I wasn't so busy running it, I'd ride it myself."

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Riders participating in Issaqueena's Last Ride this year will experience one of three mountainous routes that present "a phenomenal experience," according to Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau executive director Ken Sloan. The ride will start at 9 a.m. on Saturday at St. John's Lutheran Church in Walhalla.