Leaders meet to discuss Hartwell project

Development to include marina, hotel, golf course

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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SENECA — State tourism officials and a group of local developers are getting closer to unveiling plans for a recreational destination hub near the Interstate-85 Welcome Center on Lake Hartwell in Oconee County.

The plans, as outlined in a request for proposals (RFP) issued in 2008, would include an 18-hole golf course, marina, restaurant, cabins, hotel and a conference center.

Marion Edmonds, a spokesman for the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, said Tuesday that while all the parties involved are working toward a public announcement, the moment is not quite right yet.

Edmonds said the parties met in Greenville last week for the first time, and he expects that more frequent meetings will be taking place going forward. Among those participating in the meeting are State Parks Service Director Phil Gaines; representatives of the private developer, Sanctuary Pointe, LLC of Seneca; and an agent for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The first face-to-face meeting gave everyone a chance to know who the other players are that have a say in the project.

"It was a good meeting," Edmonds said. "There are still a lot of questions to be resolved."

Edmonds indicated that given the business model of the project, which involves a private developer, the state and a federal agency, part of the discussion centered on when to announce the plans.

Bob Daffin, a spokesman for Sanctuary Pointe, said developers would take the lead from state officials.

"The way we operate, a public presentation will be part of the process," Edmonds said.

In the meantime, Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Phil Shirley said Tuesday that a consulting firm hired by the county to analyze the best local venues for hotels and conference centers is including the Lake Hartwell project in its analysis.

Shirley said Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) — a leader in providing feasibility studies to big-time venues on projects ranging from sports stadiums, convention facilities and hotels — has completed the first phase of its study.

"They did comparables with other counties in the Southeast," Shirley said. "We just got the first report."

Shirley said it would probably take another seven to eight weeks for SAG to complete its work in Oconee.

Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) Director Ken Sloan has indicated that Oconee is at a disadvantage with neighboring counties in booking big events because it lacks hotels with conference center facilities.

The Hartwell project could include a hotel within the development and another near Interstate 85.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685