New commission to funnel tourism dollars

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — A new tourism panel approved by the Oconee County Council this week could be ready to start dishing out grants as early as July.

Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Phil Shirley said Friday that nominations to fill the new seven-member PRT Commission would be presented for approval at the June 7 County Council meeting.


Shirley

Shirley is hopeful the commission might meet for the first time by the end of June to establish

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its bylaws and policies, and set up a grant schedule. He anticipates the group could hold a meeting by the end of July to accept applications for tourism money.

The PRT Commission will serve as the advisory panel for all state and local accommodations tax (ATAX) collections and expenditures.

On Tuesday, council gave final approval to the ordinance creating the commission, which streamlines the funneling of ATAX money by doing away with State Accommodations Tax Advisory Committee and the Oconee Tourism Commission, which previously made ATAX recommendations to council.

Although the ordinance retains the Arts and Historical Commission, it stripped its ATAX funding powers.

Shirley said that by having all the ATAX money channeled through the new streamlined structure, it would help fund those activities that have the biggest impact on tourism in the county.

Oconee County receives more than $200,000 annually from state and local ATAX revenues, Shirley said.

The ordinance also provides for the continuation of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, which was initially funded on a trial basis for three years.

The PRT Commission will now recommend to council the annual budget allotment for the CVB.

Shirley, as the director of the PRT Department, and CVB Director Ken Sloan, will serve as non-voting members of the commission.

Shirley said the streamlined structure would help ease the load on his two-person office

$200,000 a year

by cutting down on the number of committees to oversee.


Sloan

The chambers of commerce and the Oconee Alliance submitted names to be considered as members of the PRT Commission.

To comply with state law, the ordinance dictates that four of the seven members be selected from the hospitality industry, and that at least two from the hospitality industry be from the lodging industry.

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