New tourism panel goes into action

PRT Commission to dish out first grants later this month

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WALHALLA — The clock is ticking on groups looking to tap Oconee County Accommodations Tax (ATAX) dollars to help bankroll their events in the community.



Shirley

Oconee's new Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission met for the first time Thursday and agreed to hear requests for grants later this month.

Five of the seven members on the panel agreed to set a deadline of Aug. 22 for organizations to submit their grant applications. The PRT Commission also agreed to meet again Aug. 29 at noon at the Oconee County Heritage Center to hear brief presentations from those seeking tourism money.

At this meeting, commissioners will prioritize the applications and make their funding decisions.

PRT Director Phil Shirley facilitated Thursday's organizational meeting.

He is a non-voting member of the group along with Ken Sloan, head of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB).

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TOURISM: $154,000

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Unable to make the meeting was Commissioner Erin McKergow, the marketing and group sales director for Wildwater Rafting.

Rosemary Bailes, nominated to be a member of the PRT Commission, attended but did not participate. Oconee County Council put Bailes' appointment on hold pending an attorney general's opinion on whether the school board member would be violating dual office holding if she took on the new appointment.

The attorney general ruled last month that Bailes could hold both positions. Council is expected to confirm her seat on the commission at its Aug. 16 meeting.

Members present were Rick Lacey, Seneca's recreation director; Dave LaVere, director of the new Museum of the Cherokee under construction in Walhalla; Mike Wallace, owner of Print It in Seneca; JoAnn Blake, owner of Magnolia Manor Bed & Breakfast in Westminster; and Brian Greer, property manager of Keowee Key Rentals/1st Choice Realty.

Shirley told the group that based on past performance, there would be about $80,000 to $100,000 in ATAX money available for grants annually.

Currently, the county has $154,000 between local and state ATAX collections. Of that, $95,000 goes to help fund the CVB, leaving $59,000 for grants. Shirley said money flows into the account each month.

On Shirley's recommendation, after making its initial grant awards later this month, the commission agreed to recommend grants twice a year. The exact dates are to be determined.

Council created the PRT Commission through an ordinance, as recommended in the county's Tourism Action Plan, to streamline ATAX funding.

Previously, four separate commissions dished out ATAX money.

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collections