Oconee Tourism Action

More funding for CVB among dozens of recommendations

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WALHALLA — Going forward, it would cost Oconee County at least $268,000 annually, or 68 percent more than is currently budgeted, to adequately operate its Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB).

That is the recommendation made in a Tourism Action Plan (TAP) for Oconee County crafted by Bob Brookover, who directs the Clemson University International Institute for Tourism Research.

Brookover was expected to present his TAP study to the Oconee County Council Tuesday night. County staff is recommending that the plan be adopted.

Funding of the CVB is just one of dozens of recommendations contained in the TAP to forge a cohesive and comprehensive strategy for promoting, marketing and reaping the economic benefits of a potentially lucrative tourism industry.

Oconee County currently funds Mountain Lakes CVB to the tune of $159,750 or $2.25 per capita from Accommodations Tax (A-tax) revenues, Brookover states in the study.

By examining the funding of other CVBs and tourism organizations around the state (except Myrtle Beach and Charleston, which are in a class of their own), and dividing the figure by the population in those areas, Brookover calculated that the average per capita funding for tourism is $3.78.

By multiplying Oconee's estimated population of 71,000 by the $3.78, Brookover recommends that Mountain Lakes CVB's budget be increased to more than $268,000 within the next two years.

Actually, Brookover suggests that the word convention be dropped from Mountain Lakes' name.

"Oconee County is not in the convention business and will not be in the convention business in the near or probably distant future," Brookover writes in the report.

The CVB is in its second year of a three-year experiment. CVB Executive Director Ken Sloan has been widely acclaimed for doing much with very little in moving the organization forward.

Brookover's TAP points out that Oconee County already is reaping the economic benefits of tourism. Citing the most recent state data available, Brookover states that Oconee receives $48.2 million annually from travelers.

Tourism also generates almost $8 million in payroll and creates 440 jobs in Oconee, the TAP study shows.

The premise of TAP is that the bottom line could be improved through public-private partnerships, improving the attractiveness of a destination, improving its market efficiency, productivity and overall management of the tourism system in Oconee.

Other recommendations include:

- Combining the existing Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) Commission, Oconee Tourism Commission and the Arts and Historical Commission into a single, seven-member organization that would develop and implement policies related to the expenditures of County A-tax revenues;
- Integrating a system of parks and greenways;
- Marketing and promoting fishing tournaments on Hartwell and Keowee lakes;
- Exploring tourism opportunities such as taking over the lease of the financially distressed Clemson Marina property controlled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers;
- Implementing signage and way-finding programs;
- Developing Oconee visitors centers;
- Developing bus tours for elder leisure; and
- Identifying and developing projects that enhance recreation and eco-tourism.

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Plan unveiled

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