Oconee approves tourism grants

BY MIKE EADS
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WALHALLA — Local tourism efforts got a six-figure boost from the Oconee County Council on Tuesday.

The council approved $161,447.51 worth of grants for local arts and civic groups, as well as staffing for the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau (MLCVB). The money comes from county and state accommodations tax revenues, which are dedicated to tourism marketing.

"There is no way we could promote our county or the events and festivals that we have to tourists without it," said Phil Shirley, who runs the county's Parks, Recreation and Tourism department. "This funding cycle was very productive ..."

The biggest share, $122,328, will fund the Mountain Lakes CVB for the next year. That office, headed by Executive Director Ken Sloan, markets Oconee County to tour operators and other businesses that could steer out-of-towners this way for day trips, vacations, business meetings and the like.

Oconee County's Accommodations Tax Commission (ATAX) approved its fall cycle of grants last month, endorsing several grants to aid local tourism efforts, including $7,105.51 to the Walhalla Civic Auditorium to market its 2012-13 season.

Athletic events also got some help. Seneca's third annual Half-Marathon was approved for $5,050 to promote the March 2013 event in national publications such as Runners World. Another $5,000 was approved to promote a National Golf Association (NGA) event.

All of the aforementioned grants were included in the council's action Tuesday. PRT and ATAX committee members evaluated the projects based on their ability to draw tourists to Oconee County.

The committee's next grant application period opens in January 2013, with a Feb. 15 deadline.

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