Oconee board approves $29K in ATAX grants

PRT commission OKs full funding to promote tourism

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — For the first time, Oconee County's tourism committee approved in full all of the eligible bids it received for grants from the county's accommodations tax.

The county's Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission voted unanimously in favor of nine grants worth a total of $29,755 to promote tourism in the county at a scheduled meeting Thursday at the Oconee Heritage Center.

The PRT commission is an advisory board, so its recommendation on

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GRANTS: All funded in full for first time

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the grants will now go to Oconee County Council for approval.

"It pleases me that we were able to fund these requests at pretty much what was asked and not trying to overspend the money that we had," commission chair Rosemary Bailes said. "I feel that the applicants are doing their jobs and (the board is) doing its job."

Bailes said this is the first time the commission has funded the grants in full, but "it probably won't be the last."

Eleven total grant applications were submitted for the ATAX funds, which as meant to be used on promoting tourism outside a 50-mile radius from the county, but only nine of them met the criteria.

The original 11 grants had asked for a total of $79,438.52, but of the nine that were eligible, only $29,755 of that amount was eligible to be allotted. That total fell within the $30,000 the commission had to use toward the grants.

The commission had previously capped its maximum amount to be given towards a single applicant at $5,000, but exercised its option to override that cap twice.

The Walhalla Civic Auditorium was approved for an $8,689 grant for advertising, with multiple board members lauding the WCA for its importance to area tourism.

"The Walhalla Civic Auditorium is the only (grant applicant) that's here all year long, and it is a huge draw and asset not only to the city of Walhalla, but to the county as a whole," commissioner Ken Sloan said. "They are in the process of making some major changes to the structure of the building and also to the programming, so I would make a recommendation that we give them the money they need for the marketing they need."

Walhalla's Oktoberfest festival was also allowed to exceed the $5,000 cap, although that was spread between two separate grant applications — one from Oktoberfest, Inc., and one from the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce for the festival.

Prior to the meeting, the commissioners were asked to rank the applicants in terms of priority. The WCA finished with the most votes, followed by the City of Seneca's half marathon and the Mayberry Comes to Westminster festival rounding out the top three.

2014 Fall ATAX Grant Cycle

Applicant	Grant approved
Walhalla Civic Auditorium	$8,689
City of Seneca	$4,800
Westminster Chamber of Commerce	$4,650
Oktoberfest, Inc.	$3,960
Issaqueena's Last Ride	$2,000
Walhalla Chamber of Commerce	$1,225
Blue Ridge Arts Center	$1,550
Oconee Heritage Center	$507
Upstate Heritage Quilt Trail	$2,374

— In order of priority as voted by Oconee County's PRT commission

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