Oconee cutting into tourism grants as funds dwindle

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — The pot of money available in 2010 to fund grants for arts and historical organizations that promote tourism in Oconee County has shrunk by more than 50 percent.

Parks, Recreation and Tourism Director Phil Shirley said Monday that the accumulation of funds available for local grants is down to about $12,000 from $25,000 the previous year.

As a result of the shrinking fund, Shirley said that the Arts & Historical Commission met on Friday and decided to limit the maximum grant award in the current cycle to $1,500, which is $1,000 less than a year ago.

Groups such as merchants associations, chambers of commerce, museums, the local community theater and Blue Ridge Arts Center use the grants to promote their events.

> "'The Commission reduced the maximum grant ... (so) they could help as many people as possible.'
>
> **Phil Shirley**
> Parks, Recreation, Tourism Director, Oconee County

Shirley said 12 grants were awarded last year.

"The Commission reduced the maximum grant amount because if they get as many applications as they did last year, they could help as many people as possible," Shirley said.

The pot of money is derived from 25 percent of revenue Oconee County receives from state Accommodations Tax (ATAX) proceeds.

Shirley said the County Council's $300,000 donation to help save property surrounding Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls from private developers is being repaid at a rate of $30,000 a year over 10 years from local ATAX money. He said ATAX money also goes to fund Oconee's operation of its Convention & Visitors Bureau.

The Arts & Historical Commission will accept applications for grants at the PRT office until March 1 at 4 p.m. The Commission will hear the requests on March 4 and make grant recommendations to the County Council on April 8.

Grant applications and guidelines may be requested by calling PRT at (864) 888-1488 or at www.oconeesc.com online. carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685.

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