Oconee making strides in tourism

Visitors spend more than $43 million in county despite weak economy

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WALHALLA — Tourism in Oconee County continues to be a bright spot with great potential for future growth despite the lingering effects of The Great Recession and tight-fisted funding from elected officials.

Visitors to Oconee spent more than $43 million in 2009, according to the most recent state tourism data on file compiled in 2010.

Tourism expenditures in Oconee sustain the lodging industry, restaurants, shops and attractions that generate more than 400 jobs with a payroll of $7.4 million.



FILE PHOTO

Events, attractions and Oconee's many scenic marvels are helping to fuel a tourism niche in the county that is making strides despite a weak economy.

The economic impact from tourism in Oconee is just a drop in the bucket compared to the $8.9 billion impact statewide that supports almost 108,000 jobs with a payroll of $1.9 billion. Most of the bounty (47 percent of the state total) is generated in the coastal areas of Horry County with its Myrtle Beach Mecca and Charleston.

Statewide, Oconee ranks 20th among the 46 counties in reaping tourism-generated benefits that include $2.8 million in taxes to the state and $2.5 million in local taxes.

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TOURISM: Shirley sees Oconee's strides

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Phil Shirley, director of Oconee's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, predicts the county is poised to reap greater benefits in the future after incorporating a Tourism Action Plan (TAP) in July of 2010.

Shirley cited TAP recommendations completed or being worked on, including:

- Restructuring the PRT Commission;
- Establishing the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau with its own annual budget derived from tourism dollars;
- Starting a signage and wayfinding program that's in the planning stage;
- Planning and funding a new disc golf course at Chau Ram Park;
- Upgrading and improving facilities at all county parks; and
- Promoting and marketing events such as attracting bus tours and the Upstate Heritage Quilt Trail.

Shirley sees Oconee's strides in tourism, small as they may appear, as important steps that combined with the efforts of other counties will help South Carolina reach its goal of tourism being a $40 billion industry by 2020.

"Communities throughout the state are going to have to place niche marketing and tourism product development as a priority," Shirley said.

Shirley added that future growth of tourism in Oconee would "depend on the priority it is given on the local level."

Currently, the combined budget for PRT and the county's

in tourism as important

three parks in this fiscal year's budget is $1.2 million, or less than 1 percent of Oconee's $43.1 million General Fund budget.

Put in perspective, Oconee dished out $1.5 million for a speculative building that sits empty in a soft market for capital investments, and paid $1.8 million for countywide reassessment of property values.

Mountain Lakes CVB Director Ken Sloan said the TAP in place would put Oconee in line for grants in the future when the economy turns around.

Sloan also sees a bright future ahead for tourism because of the leadership role taken by Duane Parrish, the state's new tourism boss, to promote, fund and advance the industry.

For instance, Sloan said Parrish established a Tourism Partnership Fund that had $1.3 million to give away this year.

He said $2.8 million in grants requests made the process keenly competitive.

"We did get $6,500 that went toward the visitors guide," he said.

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