Oconee, region practice

Tourism officials look to tap sport's $2.7 billion economic impact in state

BY CARLOS GALARZA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Clubbing a little white ball around until you sink it into a small hole on a green might seem a little silly to the uninitiated. but to South Carolina, golf is big business.

According to a study by state tourism officials, in 2007 golf generated more than $2.7 billion from sales on and off approximately 369 golf courses around the state.

The study further estimates that golf directly and indirectly is responsible for more than 33,000 jobs in South Carolina.

Golf's economic impact in the state is all the more impressive when you consider the study does not include in its totals real estate sales in golf communities, such as The Cliffs, or off-site purchases of golf equipment by local golfers.

Although golf's economic bonanza in South Carolina is mostly concentrated in the coastal areas — particularly Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head — Upstate tourism officials want a piece of the pie too, even if it's a thin slice.

Ken Sloan, executive director of Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Phil Shirley, head of the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department, saw golf's potential in the local area when they came up with the idea for an Oconee County Golf Trail.

Recently, the Oconee Golf Trail merged with the Lake Hartwell Marketing Alliance Golf Trail.

LHMA, comprised of Hart, Franklin and Stephens counties in Georgia, and Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties in South Carolina, is on a mission to transform the six-county area around Lake Hartwell into a tourist destination.

LHMA Chairman Larry Torrence said the organization plans to concentrate on promoting the Golf Trail in the coming months.

"It's amazing how few people realize there are 27 golf courses in the six-county area," Torrence said. "We have 16 of those golf courses on our Golf Trail.

The LHMA Golf Trail Privilege Player Card, on sale for $100, allows the holder to play a round at each of the 16 participating courses by paying only a cart fee.

Torrence said about 100 cards have been sold, but expects the number to climb as the group focuses on promoting it.

Sloan said the three Chamber of Commerce organizations in Oconee have the cards. The Chambers gets $25 from each card they sell and LHMA gets $75.

Although the lakes, mountains and waterfalls remain the backbone of tourism in Oconee, Sloan said golf has the potential to be a draw.

"Tee times are down across the board and this is a good way to help business," Sloan said of the Golf Trail promotion.

For more information on the Golf Trail card contact the local Chambers or go to www.mylakehartwell.org. .

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FILE PHOTO

Mark Johnson lines up a putt at Cross Creek Plantation in Seneca. The Cross Creek Plantation course and three other courses in Oconee County are part of the Lake Hartwell Martketing Alliance Golf Trail promotion that is looking to cash in on the sport's $2.7 billion economic impact in the state.

SC IMPACT

- **Total** sales (on and off the course): $2.721 billion
- **Jobs:** 33,535
- **Personal income:** $834 million
- **Federal, state and local taxes:** $276 million
- **Visiting trips that included golf:** 785,000
- **Visiting trips expenditures (on and off course):** $1.2 billion
- **Top destinations:** Myrtle Beach (53%); Hilton Head (23%)
- **Golf visitors' median age:** 50
- **Golf visitors' median household income:** $80,000 to $85,000

Source: S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism

SATURDAY, AUGUST 28, 2010

golf swing