PRT committee recommends grants for Walhalla projects

BY JUSTIN LEE CAMPBELL
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Three Walhalla tourism projects received a total of $18,600 in grant recommendations by the Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Committee.

The committee met Thursday to approve recommendations of seven projects in the county with fund requests totaling about $68,000. Of those requests, $30,000 received recommendations for funds from the county's accommodation tax.

The city of Walhalla received a recommendation of $4,600 to pave a walkway at the Stumphouse Tunnel.

PRT director Phil Shirley said the current walkway is unsafe.

"This project came about because I was up there one day with some folks, and a lady coming down the hill stumbled a little bit, and every time it rains there's a chance of washing out some of those rocks," he said. "It's a great opportunity that accommodations taxes could be put toward paving (the walkway) and putting up a handrail to assist folks getting up to the tunnel."



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From left, Rick Lacey, Phil Shirley, Dan Pollock and Rosemary Bailes discuss ATAX fund recommendations for Oconee County tourism projects. Pollock expressed concern about a caveat in the Stumphouse Tunnel's lease.

Shirley said he approached the city about paving the walkway four years ago.

"I met (with the city) the first time to share that we may have some money available," he said. "Then I called them back this past year and said I haven't seen a grant yet and (PRT would) love to help."

Committee member Dan Pollock said the tunnel is a "big out-of-state draw."

"I read the license plates out there, and it's always 50 percent out-of-state tags," said Pollock, who is also president of Walhalla Partners for Progress. "Georgia, Florida and North Carolina are the big ones ... and it's really something like 20,000 cars a year."

Committee member Rosemary Bailes asked Shirley if tourists visit the tunnel year round.

"Yes. Even in the dead of winter you're going to have people walking up there and going through it," Shirley said.

Pollock voiced a concern about the Stumphouse lease. Clemson University is leasing the property to the city of Walhalla for 30 years for one dollar, according to the lease agreement.

"There is a caveat in there that concerns me," said Pollock, who recused himself from voting due to his partnerships with the Palmetto Conservation Foundation and city of Walhalla to construct a trail network on the property. "(The caveat) speaks to improvements, and the necessity for the city of Walhalla to consult with Clemson before those improvements are done."

According to the lease, Walhalla "may, with Clemson's written permission ... and at no expense to Clemson, construct on said land such improvements ... as may be necessary for the enhancement of the property for the purposes leased."

Committee member Rick Lacey said he understood why the caveat is in the lease, "but ... when you're having people fall, it turns into a safety issue."

The city of Walhalla accepted full liability for the property, according to the lease.

"The parties agree that Clemson shall not be liable to (Walhalla) ... for any injury or damage to persons," the lease said. "(Walhalla) agrees to ... hold harmless Clemson, its trustees, officers and employees from any loss resulting from bodily injuries (including death) ... or any claims or suits against Clemson, including attorney's fees arising directly or indirectly out of any act or failure to act on (Walhalla's) part."

Shirley said at the Aug. 18 committee meeting that he talked to city administrator Nancy Goehle about the lease.

"(Goehle) went back to look at the lease, and she said the last time they paved they didn't need permission," he said. "From my standpoint, I asked the question, and that was the answer I was given."

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To read an extended version of this story with details about all the committee's funding recommendations, visit upstatetoday.com.

The committee recommended approximately half of the city's request for $9,375.

"I'll contact the city about asking for the remainder of the request in the spring," Shirley said.

The Walhalla Civic Auditorium received a $10,000 grant recommendation. The auditorium requested its total budget of $31,500 and qualified for $12,285 from ATAX funds.

Walhalla's Oktoberfest received a $4,000 recommendation out of its $6,000 request. Oktoberfest was eligible for $4,425.

Oconee County Council will review the PRT committee's recommendations on Sept. 6, according to Shirley.

The committee's next meeting is Nov. 17.