

Pickens tourism topic of recent workshop

BY GREG OLIVER
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PICKENS — No matter the area, local leaders agree that Pickens County is a destination for natural and cultural heritage tourism and outdoor recreation.

More than 40 representatives from the city of Pickens, county cultural and heritage attractions, the arts, businesses, regional and state heritage organizations, Pickens County Council and public lands met during a recent two-day conference. They sought to find ways to position the county to take advantage of tourism opportunities.

"Tourism is the number two industry in South Carolina after agriculture," said Gerald Sweitzer, former co-chairman of the Pickens County Vision 2025 plan and among the county leaders attending the conference. "We want to do a better job of promoting what we have to offer."

Although he said the conference was more specific to the northern end of Pickens County, Sweitzer believes the benefits "will trickle down."

"Right now, we recognize that one of our shortcomings is that there are no motels in the city of Pickens, so you have to go to Clemson or Easley," Sweitzer said. "We also need more places to eat."

"Pickens County, along with Oconee County, has

beautiful assets, such as the lakes, and people want to go and experience the heritage and culture of the community."

Sweitzer said Pickens County was the only county in the state to receive an Appalachian Council of Governments (ACOG) grant to assist distressed communities located near public lands.

"It's called 'Gateway to the Appalachians' and included Table Rock State Park and how to involve a little commerce, a small town bordering public lands, or Pickens," he said. "We also had to include the arts, so Ellen Kochansky assisted us with Vision 2025 trying to improve the quality of life."

Under the "Sense of Place" category that is part of Vision 2025, adopted by the county several years ago, the workshop took place. The two-day event

was designed by The Conservation Fund and the National Trust for Historic Preservation and facilitated by their staff.

Linda Caldwell, executive director of the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association, a three-county partnership in southeast Tennessee that has a similar community profile as Pickens, was a key presenter. Over the years, the association has increased the number of visitors to the region, served as an educational tool for the area, acted as a catalyst for economic development and strengthened local capacity, including improving the quality of life for residents.

"We looked at the assets that Pickens County possesses," Sweitzer said. "For example, we have the highest point in the state in Sassafras Mountain, and Table Rock State Park on S.C. Highway 11 is another popular destination."

In addition, Sweitzer said Pickens County features Happy Berry Farms and, along with Oconee County, wineries. He also said that Hagood Mill, another popular tourism site, will have the largest accessible display of petroglyphs (or pictogram and logogram images created by removing part of a rock surface by incising, picking, carving and abrading) by early next year.

"It's like stick figure drawings on rocks that are 1,000 years old,"

Sweitzer said. "This will be a national, and possibly international, attraction."

Sweitzer said an emphasis on the lakes that exist on the western side of Pickens County will also be promoted for tourism. He added that efforts to emphasize agro tourism, biking, the Pickens Flea Market, an old moonshine distillery at Hagood Mill and a trail leading to other distilleries are just a few other examples.

"We came up with action plans and will pursue developing those," Sweitzer said. "The Pickens Vision 2025 Sense of Place committee has agreed to take on one regarding signage and promotion of the upper part of Pickens County."

Efforts will also be made to develop a comprehensive map and brochure of cultural resources, a website, a brand identity, freestanding kiosks, GPS markers on all locations, and networking with all visitors centers, convention and visitor bureaus and chambers of commerce to market and promote destinations.

"We're working to determine how to protect these beautiful golden eggs we have here while advancing cultural tourism, which has very low impact," Sweitzer said.

Sweitzer said the group plans to meet again in about a month.

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FILE PHOTO

Table Rock State Park, located on S.C. Highway 11, is one of Pickens County's most popular tourist attractions.