Planned rec center in Oconee creating buzz

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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SENECA — Plans are still in the early stages, but the announced goal of building an outdoor recreation complex at Sanctuary Pointe within the next two years could catapult Oconee County and the Upstate into a $600 billion industry that continues to grow in the United States.

Sanctuary Pointe is the name given to a 325-acre tract of land on Lake Hartwell in Oconee near the border with Georgia that is controlled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

In 2012, the State Budget and Control Board headed by Gov. Nikki Haley approved a sublease of the property to a group of investors based in Seneca who want to create a tourism center there with hotels, restaurants, marina, cabins and a golf course.

Under the terms of the agreement with the state, Sanctuary Pointe LLC has until December 2020 to have something built there or be well on the way to getting a first phase completed.

Sanctury Pointe LLC has yet to announce any deal to get the stagnant project off and running.

In recent weeks, however, the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor directed by Michelle McCollum has been creating a buzz throughout the state by promoting its plans to build what's being called the Great Outdoors Center at the Sanctuary Pointe property.

The SCNHC project is separate and apart from the Sanctuary Pointe LLC project, but McCollum and Sanctuary Pointe developer Robert Daffin agree they'll complement each other and combine to make Ooonee and the Upstate an outdoors recreation destination.

"Outdoor recreation is a growing trend right now, as is healthy living, which is the perfect stage for implementing this type of project," McCollum told The Journal on Thursday. "Once open, it will be a place of pride for Oconee and the entire Upstate."

OVERLOOKED GIANT

A 2012 study called "The Outdoor Recreation Economy" undertaken by Southwick Associates Inc. on behalf of the Colorado-based Outdoor Industry Association calculated that outdoor recreation generates about $646 billion in the U.S. economy and creates 6.1 million jobs throughout the country.

The study called outdoor recreation "an overlooked economic giant" in the United States.

"More than 140 million Americans make outdoor recreation a priority in their daily lives — and they prove it with their wallets," the study asserted.

It's those kind of numbers that McCollum references in touting the potential of such a project in Oconee.

"With Sanctuary Pointe and the Great Outdoors Center, Oconee can surface as the premier outdoor recreation destination for the state, just as Charleston is the premier historic tourism destination," McCollum said.

McCollum said she and her staff are in the pre-development stage for the GOC, and she is not ready to speculate on the total cost of the project or how many partners will ultimately be at the table.

"What we do know is that with current partners, this is a project unlike anything else in the Southeast United States, or possibly the county," McCollum said.

McCollum, who holds the titles of president and CEO of the Heritage Corridor, identified current partners as Clemson University, USA Olympic Archery and Olympic Kayak, Sanctuary Pointe Resort, the National Park Service and South Carolina departments of natural resources, agriculture, forestry and parks, recreation and tourism.

EXPLORING OPTIONS

According to the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor website, the organization was designated as such by Congress in 1996 through a program of the National Parks Service.

The Heritage Corridor operated as part of SCPRT at one time, but now operates as a separate entity, a state tourism official told The Journal.

Dawn Dawson-House said this week on behalf of SCPRT that the department is behind the Great Outdoors Center project at Sanctuary Pointe.

"When (SCPRT) was presented with the concept of the GO Center, we responded positively and are in discussions with the Corps of Engineers on the change in original plans," Dawson-House said. "The Corps must approve before moving forward."

Dawson-House added that SCPRT has not committed any funds for the GOC.

McCollum said the Heritage Corridor program has not received state funding in more than eight years, but the organization is open to exploring all avenues of funding for the GOC.

McCollum said the Heritage Corridor's annual budget of approximately $500,000 comes from the federal government and is put to use in local communities in the form of local grants that are accessed after local matching funds have been secured. The Cherokee Museum of South Carolina in Walhalla has tapped into those funds, as well as other local organizations.

Aside from attracting partners who'll invest in the GOC, McCollum said the Heritage Corridor would also bring money to the table.

"It is premature to talk actual dollars at this point," she said.

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SC National Heritage Corridor president

