Public-private funding key to tourism success, according to officials

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SENECA — A member of the steering committee entrusted with implementing a comprehensive tourism marketing strategy in the Upstate said Tuesday that forming public-private partnerships will be a key to success.

Vicki Fletcher, executive director of the Pendleton District Commission, said the public-private model is critical for funding many of the recommendations contained in the Tourism Product Development Concept for the Upstate unveiled in Seneca last week by top state tourism officials.

Fletcher said funding will be a big issue for the committee going forward.

Although Chad Prosser, director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT), identified local accommodations tax money as a source for funding the Upstate's tourism product development plan, Fletcher said it is just one piece of the funding puzzle.

"A lot needs to be public-private," Fletcher said. "It doesn't have to be government driven. That would be a mistake."

Ken Sloan, Oconee County Mountain Lakes Visitors & Convention Bureau (CVB) executive director, agrees with Fletcher. He said Tuesday that Oconee's vital need for a combination hotel and conference center to bolster its tourism objectives could only happen with private funding.

"We are not hotel managers," Sloan said. "It has to be private investment."

However, Sloan said government has a key role to play in such a development by coming up with concessions and incentives that could attract hoteliers to Oconee.

Fletcher is one of four members on the steering committee that includes South Carolina Heritage Corridor Executive Director Michelle McCollum, Discover Upcountry Carolina Association Director Tim Todd and Greenville Visitors and Convention Bureau President Chris Stone.

All four are no strangers to Oconee County tourism. They appreciate the key role Oconee plays in promoting Upstate tourism because of the county's bountiful natural resources and many cultural and historical landmarks.

Fletcher said one of the group's objectives is to get everybody that has a stake in moving Upstate tourism forward involved in the movement. She said one of the keys to success is forming partnerships, packaging festivals and events so they could be marketed comprehensively and forming regional product clusters capable of attracting visitors and extending their stay in the area.

On the local front, Sloan is moving quickly to establish a committee in Oconee that will take the state PRT plan for marketing Upstate tourism and run with it.

Sloan said he would like to see 15 to 20 or more people on the local committee, which he thinks would be easy to do given the enthusiastic support the community has given to the Mountain Lakes CVB.

"By the end of July we want to have the first meeting and begin developing a business plan," Sloan said.

According to a state study, tourism in the Upstate generated $1.5 billion in 2007, supported approximately 15,000 jobs and provided almost $100 million in taxes.