SC Cherokee museum set for expansion

MUSEUM: Council unanimously voted to donate unused building

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALHALLA — Thanks to a fortuitous chain of events, the Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina is expanding its footprint in Walhalla.

Last year, museum directors were unsuccessful in their attempt to purchase an adjacent building by way of the proposed Oconee County capital project sales tax referendum. The museum did not make the cut of the projects included in the referendum proposal, which voters rejected anyway.

After that disappointment, the museum's fortunes began to turn for the better. First came the good news a few months ago that state park officials agreed to turn over their Cherokee interpretive exhibits and kiosks at Keowee-Toxaway State Park on S.C. Highway 11 in Pickens County to the museum in Walhalla.

"They had shut the whole thing down and closed it to the public the last few years," museum director Luther Lyle said Wednesday. "They agreed to give us everything that was in the museum and the kiosks, which amounts to about 47 painted panels of the history of the Cherokee, and all the archaeological artifacts from Fort Prince George and Keowee Town."

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TO LEARN MORE

Visit the Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina, at 70 Short St. in Walhalla, which is open on Saturdays from 10 a.m.-2 p.m., email lutherlyle@bellsouth.net, or visit the museum's Facebook page.

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Lyle

This week, good fortune continued to smile on the museum when Oconee County Council turned over an adjacent, abandoned government building that was last used by the Oconee County coroner. After a unanimous vote Tuesday night, the building will become the property of the museum as soon as all the paperwork is completed.

"Actually, everything that (state park officials) gave us will fill up the building that the county is giving us," Lyle said. "It's neat that the county gave us the building and the state gave us the display to put in the building."

Lyle called the gift from the state "priceless." He said Duke Energy gave the land for the park and paid to have the Cherokee interactive center built there. Also, Lyle said the S.C. Department of Archaeology and Anthropology contributed by doing all the archaeological digs at Fort Prince George and Keowee Town to come up with the artifacts that will be on display.

"It's a goldmine," Lyle said. "Things just happened. (State park officials) didn't have enough visitation to warrant keeping a ranger there. ... They are delighted we will have their exhibits here and close by."

During a public hearing before the third and final reading of an ordinance turning over the building to the museum, everyone who spoke had only good things to say about the way museum leaders showcase Cherokee history and said museum officials great stewards of their property on Short Street, across from the Oconee County Courthouse.

Attorney Keith Denny, whose office is nearby, said the museum has improved the look of Short Street.

"I believe it would be an asset," Denny said.

Lyle estimates the museum will have to raise about $50,000 through grants and donations to renovate the donated building and construct a connector between the existing facility and the museum annex.

"Both these things happened at the same time," Lyle said. "We had the promise of the artifacts and displays from Keowee-Toxaway, and this building became available at the same time. If either one did not happen, we could not do anything. ... It's like it's fate."

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Luther Lyle
Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina director

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Oconee County Council voted Monday night to turn over an adjacent building to the Museum of the Cherokee in South Carolina, located on Short Street in Walhalla.