Seneca council receives update on tourism initiative

BY CHRISTINA CLEVELAND
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SENECA — South Carolina's Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department announced this week the tourism industry has seen another good year in the Palmetto State, and plans for Oconee's countywide tourism initiative presented to Seneca City Council this week are highlighting some of its possible local impacts.

Out of South Carolina's $18 billion industry, there are around 450,000 visitors a year in Oconee spending about $56 million a year, according to county parks, recreation and tourism director Phil Shirley, who gave the presentation at city hall Tuesday night.



Shirley

Last year, the state grew more than 40 percent on tourism expenditures, Shirley said. And since 2006, tourism expenditures have grown more than 29 percent even through the 2009 economic depression.

Shirley said that means each year there is $12.5 more million being "pumped out in our econ-

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omy by our tourists than we did the year before."

"It's growing at a great rate," he said.

And the figures look good for South Carolinians, he said.

"When you calculate that, you look at our households and you divide the taxes that those tourists are paying versus our households, every household in Oconee County, the tax base, they're paying about $165 less than they would have to if we didn't have our tourists, and that number continues to climb," he said. "Just last year it was $157. So the more tourists come in, the more that number goes up that we don't have to pay. So it's very good for us."

Organizers in Oconee are still presenting plans to find ways to highlight "natural, cultural and historic resources" so the area can become a destination.

"Destination Oconee" — the tourism initiative involving Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster — has also been presented to county council.

Each participating municipality now has recommendations from the plan, which came together from public input, one-on-one interviews, stakeholder focus groups and case study reviews of other destinations.

Seneca has been recommended to plan an annual arts festival and create an arts and culture district by expanding on the successes of the Lunney House Museum, Strickland Museum and art and public spaces.

The city has also been encouraged to promote local events with Clemson, specifically figuring out how to get more visitors into downtown Seneca on weekends with Clemson University home football games.

Additional recommendations include expanding the success of Ram Cat Alley and creating a downtown streetscape plan.

Downtown revitalization efforts will be important, according to Shirley.

"Across the U.S., bypasses have lured retail and restaurants away from downtowns. That's no secret to you all, but it's a challenge," he said.

"We've got to figure out how to get retail, restaurant and vibrancy back into our downtowns, and there's some details in this plan that will help us do that."

Shirley said the next steps will be figuring out "where the document sits," how to move forward with yearly strategy, putting a financial number on the plans and figuring out how to complete them.

County councilman Paul Cain, who represents District 3, Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell and Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau president Ken Sloan attended the meeting Tuesday.

Seneca council members have copies of the presentation and could further discuss recommendations at the city's next work session.

"There are lots of great things happening right now, and I know all of us would like to see that momentum continue, because the future is bright here," Seneca mayor Dan Alexander said.

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