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Seneca's new good time guy!

New events coordinator learning as he goes

BY ANDREW MOORE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA – Riley Johnson has always been an idea man.

A Seneca High School graduate, the 43-year-old Johnson made a name for himself as a talented planner and public relations go-to-guy in Greenville, helping initiate such popular festivals and events as Fall For Greenville, Freedom Weekend Aloft and Boo In The Zoo.

Now Johnson, who also manages real estate in the Clemson area, is taking his talent back home as the Seneca events coordinator. Johnson was hired in December and started the new job Jan. 4.

"It's really been a learning process of how cities work," Johnson said. "In the past, if you had an idea, you just threw it out, you got sponsors and you ran with it. Here, you really have to make everyone aware of something before you move on it."

Johnson is the city's first-ever events coordinator, and will be working closely with Recreation Director Rick Lacey in planning events such as the Meet and 3 and Fourth of July celebrations, as well as future new festivals and concerts. He'll be trusted with coordinating usage of Hospitality and Accommodations Tax (HAT) money and marketing events within the city.

"This is the best group of people working together I've ever met. It's a team atmosphere. There's real chemistry here," Johnson said.

Johnson's aim is to funnel activity in the greater Greenville area west into Seneca. One example he sites is that of James Gregory, a popular comedian. Gregory, who will make stops in Greenville and Charleston this month, will also perform at the Oconee Community Theatre on Feb. 11. Whether it's a circus or zoo act, musical act or anything in between, Johnson believes Seneca is capable of diverting even more creative traffic Oconee's way.

"We need to take advantage of things like that," he said. "I want to see us have more acts that do places like Greenville and Spartanburg."

A personal friend of Johnson's, Bi-Lo Center Director of Events Susan Quin, is expected to help Seneca's new events coordinator by tossing some ideas his way. Johnson also sees Seneca's recreation department as a potential draw, as well as the natural beauty of area lakes.

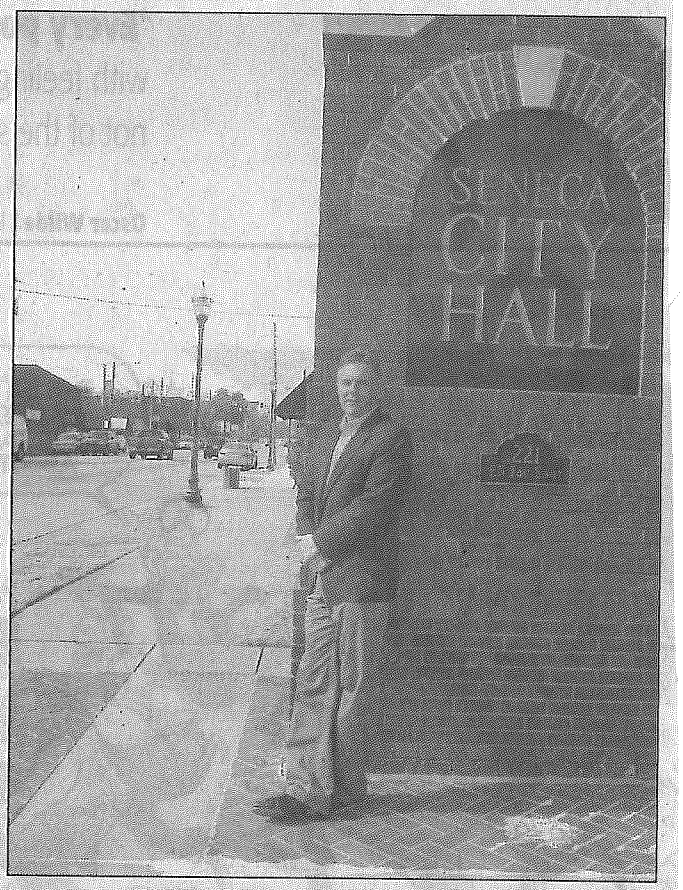
Little things matter, too. A more frequently updated Web site, as well as an events calendar on the city's phone line when someone is on hold, are expected to increase connectivity between the city and its people.

"This time next year hopefully we'll have new stuff under our belts," Johnson said. "But my role right now is to hold the clipboard for the quarterbacks. Rick Lacey and Dan Alexander are the quarterbacks."

Besides bringing in new events, augmenting current ones is a must. Weather permitting, more than 25,000 people are expected to flood Seneca this May for the city's Memorial Day weekend activities and Johnson is throwing around new ideas from horse-buggy rides to a 5K race to liven the event.

"I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel here. The wheel ain't broke," he said recently.

"The goal is to have something here every week, whether it's just something small or a big outdoor festival."



ANDREW MOORE/STAFF

Forty-three-year-old Riley Johnson has been the Seneca events coordinator for just under a month, but already has big aspirations for his hometown.

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