# *Shirley, Sloan turning Oconee into a destination*



FILE PHOTO

**Local lakes and campgrounds now draw thousands of tourists each week, thanks in part to Phil Shirley's commitment since Day One to make Oconee County a destination. He defers the credit to his PRT staff and Ken Sloan of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau.**

**BY MIKE EADS**
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WALHALLA — When Phil Shirley took over as director of Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism seven years ago, tourism and marketing were all but nonexistent.



Shirley



Sloan

"It all fell on me and one person and one department couldn't do it successfully," Shirley recalled.

Local lakes and campgrounds now draw thousands of tourists each week, thanks in part to Shirley's commitment since Day One to make Oconee County a destination. He defers the credit to his PRT staff and Ken Sloan of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We really have a great team," Shirley said. "The County Council has turned us loose and Mr. (Scott) Moulder and Mr. (Glenn) Breed have given us the tools to succeed."

Sloan, who operated an outdoor center on Lake Jocassee prior to starting up the Mountain Lakes CVB in 2008, said an early masterstroke of Shirley's helped to put Oconee County out there. He hosted several tour bus operators and journalists for two-day tours of everything Oconee has to offer tourists. The operators were impressed and Southern Living and several travel trade publications ran stories about the county.

"That was the initial step of getting us on the map," Sloan said.

Shirley once again deflected, this time talking up Mountain Lakes CVB.

"The biggest thing has been getting the CVB established," Shirley said. "That was a big challenge to sell the need for destination marketing here in Oconee County."

Shirley also thinks that getting the county's accommodation taxes dedicated exclusively to promoting tourism has played big role in the county's growing tourism market.

While Sloan oversees tourism and marketing, Shirley sits on the CVB board and the two are in constant contact.

"Phil and I have been partners on marketing since before starting the CVB," said Sloan. "We work on strategies and on the budget. He is a great individual to have around bounce ideas off of."

Shirley sees the teamwork as a real plus.

"We work hand-in-hand ... it's really a partnership," Shirley said.

The mutual respect was evident recently when Sloan nominated Shirley for the Southeast Travel Society's 2012 Forty for the Future award, which was presented earlier this month during the Oconee County Council meeting.

The county's campgrounds take up much of his time now, along with daily dealings with city agencies, Duke Power, the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service and more. Growth and updating the 40-plus year-old camp facilities around the county are a priority.

"We're looking at opportunities for county parks expansions, and the way we manage them," Shirley said, "and asking ourselves: 'Can we make a difference in the things we offer visitors?'"

But Shirley keeps a hand in the tourism side of his business. He is working with Sloan and CVB board member Lorraine Harding to rebrand Mountain Lakes, with a new look and feel due by September. He is also looking for money to fund a survey by Clemson Ph.D. students to determine what groups the CVB should be targeted with tourism campaigns.

Shirley is also active in trying to start up a capital campaign to give the YMCA its own home in Oconee County.

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