

Sloan talks 'Destination O

conee' with Westminster council

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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WESTMINSTER — Oconee County is shooting for Appalachian rustic elegance and wants Westminster, Seneca and Walhalla to jump on board.

Ken Sloan, president of Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, presented the results of the South Carolina Great Outdoor initiative to Westminster's city council on Tuesday evening.

A little more than a year ago, Westminster approved funding to partner with

Oconee County, Seneca and Walhalla to develop comprehensive marketing and tourism branding for



Sloan

the county and the individual municipalities as part of the "Destination Oconee" plan. "A tremendous amount of research has been conducted on the future of the county and these three cities," Sloan said. "But at the end of the day, this report is really no more than words on paper that will go nowhere unless you as a city

council and administration take that plan and do something with it."

Oconee County has already launched new ad campaigns with slogans such as "Breathe Easy: It's a Mountain Thing" and "Who says the best seat has to be in a house?" The words overlay breathtaking images of the mountains, lakes and outdoor living. According to Sloan, the tracked response to the ads has been outstanding.

Prior to the initiative, Westminster had established

SEE SLOAN, PAGE A5

FROM PAGE A1

new signage for the city, but Sloan said these images of apples or trains no longer accurately represent Westminster.

"The apple brand that Westminster wears is no longer the brand of the city. The apples are up in Long Creek," Sloan said. "And although 13 trains come by per day, no one is getting off those trains and spending money in Westminster. So you're not apples and you're not trains."

What he does notice in Westminster are quite a few cars driving up U.S. Highway 123 with kayaks on top and bicycles on back. He sees outdoor enthusiasts going rafting, hiking and camping.

That's why the initiative was tagged Westminster as a "Small Town with Big Adventure." The ads highlight Westminster's whitewater rafting. But Sloan said the report isn't just about

tourism — it's about improving the quality of life and economic development in the area.

"Last year 450,000 tourists visited Oconee County and deposited over \$56 million into our economy — \$56 million is a lot of money," Sloan said. "That's a 29 percent increase since 2006."

The presentation outlined key recommendations for Westminster, including improving the backside of Main Street, offering stay-and-play packages and creating a market village.

Sloan also identified a need for restaurants and lodging, specifically urging a boutique hotel. He also suggested the city maintain a sign ordinance to improve the public's perception of the city.

"This isn't something the county is forcing — we're just making recommendations. What you do with these recommendations is your own business," Sloan

said. "But we're by your side and will help in any way we can."

Based on successful projects in other cities in South Carolina and throughout the Southeast, the initiative advocates public/private funding through grants, tax incentives and other programs.

Council members were receptive to Sloan's presentation and were encouraged since some of the initiatives already underway by the city coincide with the elements in the report.



Lord

"The city will need to determine which of the other recommendations to pursue," city administrator

Jeff Lord said, "and how to do so in a manner that best reflects the character of our community."

This sample from the South Carolina Great Outdoor initiative ad campaign for Westminster highlights whitewater rafting. SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

