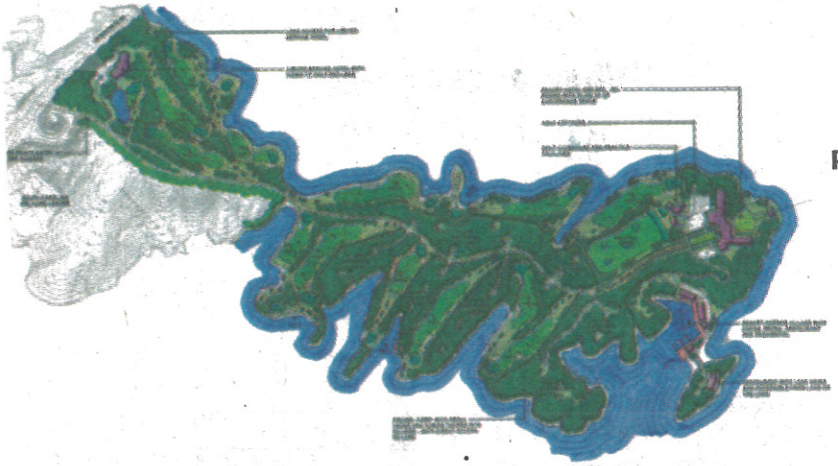
State tourism boss stands behind Sanctuary Pointe



The rendering at left shows an early proposal for the Sanctuary Pointe project on the shores of Lake Hartwell in Oconee County.

FILE

TOURISM: Oconee 'a true gem'

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — South Carolina's tourism boss says he's disappointed that construction has yet to start at the long-awaited Sanctuary Pointe resort project, but he remains confident it will get off the ground and be a boon to the state and Oconee County.

Despite the project's painstakingly slow progress, Duane Parrish, director of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, is not giving up on a project that's been on the radar of top officials in state government circles including Gov. Nikki Haley.



Parrish

The proposed $100 million tourist destination — to be anchored by a waterfront resort, conference center, marina and outdoor recreation center — is planned on a 300-acre peninsula on Lake Hartwell behind the Interstate 85 Welcome Center in Oconee

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County that is owned by the U.S. Corps of Engineers and leased to SCPRT.

When the South Carolina Senate confirmed Haley's appointment of Parrish to head PRT in early 2011, Sanctuary Pointe was already years in the planning.

The project is the brainchild of Lake Keowee residents Robert Daffin, a resort development expert, and his partner with Sanctuary Pointe LLC, Elmon Henry. The partners convinced state officials they would have investors in place to make the I-85 tourist attraction a reality.

During an interview with The Journal this week, Parrish expressed his confidence in the development team and the project.

"I think the project will get done," Parrish said. "We're still moving forward."

Having worked in the private sector before making the transition to public service with the state government, Parrish understands the frustrations by many with the excruciatingly slow pace of the progress being made.

In the case of Sanctuary Pointe, developers have the state and federal governments to contend with because the project sits on U.S. Corps of Engineers property that is leased to the PRT.

"Essentially, any time you make a change or adjustment to the original master plan, it has to come back to us and the Corps of Engineers," Parrish said. "I'm still confident it's going to happen. I would hope of course that it would go faster, but when you've got two branches of government involved, it seems to move a little slower."

The agreement between the state and the developers calls for the first phase of the project to be completed or close to being completed by December 2020.

"If you'd asked me three years ago or two years ago, I would probably have said I would like to have something under construction by the end of 2015," the tourism boss added. "We're not there yet, but I'm hopeful we could break ground in 2016. I just think it's an involved process, but it is public land.

"We need to have the right products, and I'm speaking for the state as well as the Army Corps of Engineers — we're going to have the right products in there to be successful long term."

During his interview with The Journal, Parrish made it clear that an 18-hole golf course is still part of the project, although it's been eliminated from the first phase.

"The initial plan presented years ago with the golf course, all of that remains the same," he said. "It has not changed. The golf course is still going there."

The reason for not including the golf course in phase one is being dictated by market conditions pointing to sluggish golf course development numbers, according to Parrish.

"(The golf course) has to be part of the project," he said.

Development of Sanctuary Pointe fits in well with the state's Tourism Action Plan that was created before Parrish joined PRT.

That plan promotes the carving out of tourism niches in the Midlands and Upstate to balance the tourism-laden coastal areas of Charleston and Myrtle Beach, which drive the state's $19 billion tourism industry.

Parrish sees Sanctuary Pointe being the gateway to S.C. Highway 11 on Exit 1 in Oconee.

"Oconee County is a true gem along the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains," he said. "To me, Highway 11 is much like 17, the coastal highway along the ocean. Highway 11 is the highway along the base of the mountain. You have some of the same characteristics."

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