Task force commences on county tourism plan

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALHALLA — Five members of the seven-person board hand-picked by Oconee County Council to execute a comprehensive tourism action plan got their feet wet as they jumped into the daunting task this week.

The 200-page Destination Oconee plan outlines key steps, recommendations and initiatives designed to help the county reach its tourism potential as an outdoor recreation hub in South Carolina.

Present for the group's first meeting were Katie Smith, an employee and graduate of the Parks, Recreation and Tourism master's degree program at Clemson University; Jennifer Barnhart, who works for the U.S. Forest Service; Luther Lyle, director of the Cherokee museum and a promoter of history, arts and culture in the county; David Washburn, who retired after working in senior-level positions of state government, including the Department of Commerce; and Hal Welch, a veteran newspaperman who manages day-to-day operations at The Journal.

Two other panel members were unable to attend — real estate broker Bob Hill and retiree Robert Moore, whose background in the hotel and tourism industry, including a stint in Myrtle Beach, will come in handy.

Keeping members' feet anchored and eyes on the prize was the group's coordinator, Janet Hartman, who was recently hired by Oconee Economic Alliance to manage the Destination Oconee project, among multiple other tasks that include helping partnering municipalities Seneca, Walhalla and Westminster revitalize and strengthen their downtown districts.

"I thought it was a good meeting to get everyone together and discuss the direction we want to take," Hartman told The Journal on Friday.

Hartman brings a unique perspective to the job, having worked as director of the Downtown Development Authority in the city of Blairsville, which is nestled in the northeast Georgia mountains. During a visit to a Walhalla City Council meeting earlier this week, Hartman said Oconee reminds her of Blairsville because of its beautiful mountain landscape, lakes and plentiful recreational spots for outdoor activity.

Hartman said that part of her job, and a major focus of the Destination Oconee plan, is working closely with each city to explore how they can cooperate to advance their downtown districts and tourism within the framework of Destination Oconee's branding and marketing components.

Oconee Economic Alliance director Richard Blackwell attended Thursday's first meeting of the Destination Oconee team and offered some words of encouragement.

"This is a process," he said. "It's the first of many meetings. ... Let's get the little things done first."

Phil Shirley, head of the county's department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, also sat in and told the group he would be tracking the panel's work to make sure it isn't duplicating work that's been done or already underway.

Hartman said the group — which agreed to meet on the third Thursday of the month — will establish its priorities during subsequent meetings.

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