Tourism branding the topic of Oconee biz forum

CVB president: 'We lack that cool factor'

BY STEVEN BRADLEY
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Doing research for the Oconee County Great Outdoors initiative, visitors bureau boss Ken Sloan said about 85 interviews were conducted on tourism in the county, and the answers to one particular question stood out.

"If you've never been to Oconee County before, and you're coming up Highway 123 and you go into Seneca, would you stop? If you kept going up 123 to Westminster, would you be compelled to stop there? Now think about Walhalla, are you compelled to stop there?" he asked.


Sloan

Sloan said 100 percent of the people interviewed answered "no."

"(It's) for the very same reason our visitors are telling us they wouldn't stop — we lack that cool factor," he said.

Sloan and others are hoping to change all that.

Along with Michelle McCollum, president of the S.C. National Heritage Corridor, Sloan spoke at the Oconee Economic Alliance business forum on Thursday to discuss the marketing strategy — which seeks to spread a cohesive theme of "rustic elegance" throughout the county to improve its tourism branding.


McCollum

McCollum discussed plans for a South Carolina Great Outdoors Center at Sanctuary Pointe on Lake Hartwell near Fair Play. The center would be an outdoor recreation hub and host events such as archery programs and hiking and biking, she said.

"We're going to introduce people to a variety of different sports, and then what we want them to do is get out from the Sanctuary Pointe Great Outdoors Center property and explore Oconee County and the Upstate," she said.

As part of the marketing plan, individual logos and slogans have been developed for Oconee County ("Land beside the water"), as well as the participating municipalities — Walhalla ("Main Street to the mountains"), Westminster ("Small town, big adventure") and Seneca ("On the edge of it all").

McCollum said Oconee County didn't have to go far to find examples of places where a similar strategy had produced benefits.

"Just look at your neighbors — look at Greenville, look at downtown Anderson, look at Greenwood, look at Greer," she said. "People are doing it, and it's working — and economic benefits are coming because of it."

When he took the microphone, Sloan began with areas of progress happening in the county. He discussed the Hampton Inn in Seneca, which he called a "huge success."

"They were a great investment for our county and for the city of Seneca," he said.

Sloan said the Hampton Inn's occupancy rates are averaging above 85 percent, and every hotel in the county has higher occupancy rates than at any time before. He also said the county accommodations tax is up more than 65 percent.

"The people staying in these hotels, probably 10 percent at most are visitors, which means about 90 percent are contractors. ... That means there's a lot of economic development going on right now and a lot of construction," he said.

But while there are positive signs, Sloan said Oconee is dealing with what he called "the boomerang effect" in terms of tourism.

"Neighboring communities have visitors that come into Oconee County — from Greenville, from Clemson, Clayton, Highlands, Anderson," he said. "They come in here, they ride on our roads, they visit our waterfalls and raft on our rivers and play on our lakes, and they turn around and go back home at the end of the day."

Sloan said during research for the Great Outdoors initiative, those tourists who were interviewed said Oconee lacked "the cool factor" to get them to stay in the area after they had visited.

"Those cities Michelle mentioned, that's where they want to stay," he said. "They have diversity and uniqueness and dining and shopping opportunities; they have bars and they have nightlife and they have entertainment, and that's what they're looking for — and that's what we lack here."

Sloan discussed the importance of community development codes to the marketing plan — meaning elected officials setting policy for the appearance of buildings and other developments.

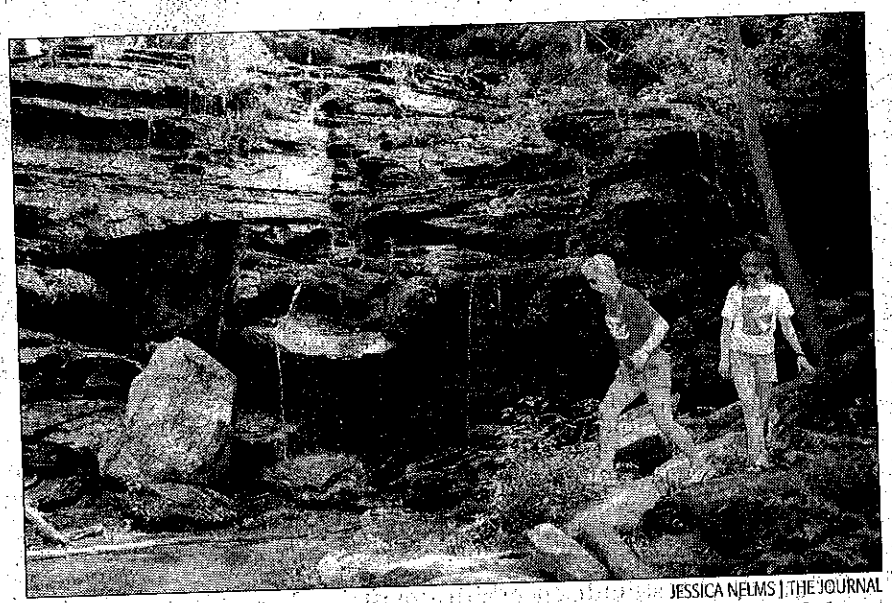
He said this would be of particular importance around the new Walhalla High School on S.C. Highway 11, where he said developers would flock once they learn there is infrastructure in place.

"With the code in place, we get rustic elegance — we can enforce certain signage to look the way we want it to look," he said. "Without a code, you're going to have 60-foot arches between you and the Blue Ridge Mountains across the street from the high school."

Sloan said the CVB and the S.C. National Heritage Corridor would be asking county council to adopt a countywide hospitality tax and a community development code and approve the hire of a full-time employee to manage the Great Outdoors initiative.

"Without community support, this project will grow no legs," he said.

sbradley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6685



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Although Oconee County has attractions such as Issaqueena Falls to bring visitors to the area, the county lacks the "cool factor" to keep guests here, local tourism official Ken Sloan told those in attendance at Thursday's Oconee Economic Alliance business forum.