Tourism discussion hits on Walhalla's potential

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WALHALLA — A roundtable discussion during the recent Heritage Development Summit Conference at Clemson University included a word or two about this small town's potential for capturing out-of-county visitors.

Walhalla already generates a good deal of business traffic from being Oconee's county seat where most local government offices are located. Add to that the county jail and courthouse and you can see why the town stays busy.

Michelle McCollum and others who participated at the Heritage Development event speculate that Walhalla could be more than the county seat. They see a town that could be pulling in more visitors by doing a better job branding and marketing the draw of Issaqueena Falls cascading down Stumphouse Mountain.

Tourism guides and websites almost always tag Issaqueena Falls as being near Walhalla. Observers take note of the many out-of-state license plates belonging to visitors who come to enjoy a picnic with a view of the mountains and the sound of running water.

McCollum contends there are many rural pockets throughout the state with unique attractions similar to Walhalla's and its proximity to Issaqueena and Stumphouse Tunnel.

"I see that in a lot of our communities, not just Walhalla," McCollum said. "When I first came on with the (South Carolina National Heritage) Corridor over 10 years ago, that's what we're talking about. We are the gateway to Highlands. Why don't we stop them? Stop them in their tracks and then you can stay here. It's the same up and down the Heritage Corridor."

McCollum says there are policymakers who insist it's not the public sector's job to put in sidewalks or plant trees.

"Well, businesses are not going to do that in a downtown streetscape," she added. "That is the public sector's job and it stimulates the economies."

Walhalla-based conservationist Harold Thomas is among those who think Walhalla is sitting on a gold mine in Issaqueena and Stumphouse that is not being tapped for all its worth. Thomas was a key figure in leading a community campaign almost five years ago to save large portions of Oconee Mountain from falling into the hands of a private developer.

Walhalla voters recently reshuffled the town's political landscape by electing new leaders determined to put a stronger emphasis on developing local tourism.

Some of the participants in last week's tourism conference at Clemson University say that any attempt at developing tourism should include doing a better job of branding and marketing the connection with Issaqueena and Stumphouse.



FILE PHOTO

Tourism officials and many conservationists believe that Walhalla is sitting on an economic gold mine with Issaqueena Falls and Stumphouse Tunnel located just north of the city.