Tourism plan's focus is the great outdoors

Top tourism official unveils new strategy in Oconee and Pickens

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SENECA — South Carolina's top tourism official unveiled a plan at the Gignilliat Center Wednesday that would package and promote the Upstate as a destination for visitors looking for outdoor adventure and recreation.

The comprehensive and strategic approach to promoting tourism would also market the Upstate's culture and heritage, farming and food traditions with an eye toward not only attracting visitors, but keeping them around longer so they can spend more of their money.

As visualized by the plan, Upstate tourism would draw upon Greenville as a main hub for creating a total getaway vacation package.

Chad Prosser, director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, made a rare appearance in Seneca to present the "Tourism Product Development Concept for the Upstate."

Oconee and Pickens counties, with their proximity to lakes Keowee, Jocassee and Hartwell, popular state parks and waterfalls, would benefit greatly from the plan.

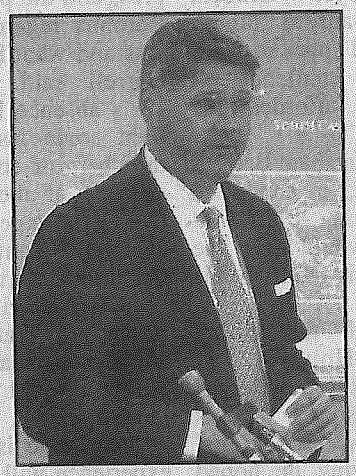
Prosser, who also visited Pickens County Wednesday, said the concept for developing tourism in the Upstate is important to Oconee and issued a challenge to those at the well-attended meeting.

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"Do we have the resolve to make this happen?" Prosser asked of the audience, which included leaders in the public and private sector.

Peter MacNulty, managing director of Dublin, Ireland-based Tourism Development International, presented the nuts and bolts of the plan.

In his overview, MacNulty said the Upstate would be established as a top-ranking destination area in the Southeast for outdoor nature-based activities. He said studies show that people drawn to outdoor interests also have an affinity to an area's cultural and historical heritage.



Chad Prosser

However, MacNulty said efforts must be made to enhance the area's lush natural resources by enhancing the experience with better public access to lakes, rivers and waterfalls. He said adding boardwalks and other such fixtures would help too.

MacNulty said more cabins should be added to parks using Devils Fork State Park as an example of the best practice to model.

Furthermore, if the area's natural resources are to be promoted and marketed to bring visitors, a concerted effort should be made to maintain and preserve those assets, MacNulty added. For instance, stakeholders should address the amount of motor sports allowed on the lakes and sewage from campsites spotted at lakes Keowee and Jocassee.

The tourism expert said the culture and heritage draw could be enhanced with a "mountain life heritage attraction," comprehensively marketing regional events, adding a Revolutionary War route, a Cherokee Foothills scenic trail and an arts and crafts trail.

MacNulty said all of these enhancements would be packaged by branding with the Greenville "hub" with its track record and potential for attracting visitors.

Chris Stone, president of the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau, made the trip to Seneca also to hear the state's presentation. Stone said Greenville's tourism would be enhanced if other Upstate counties developed their potential by using the state's marketing strategy.

"We're here to support you and not tell you what to do," Stone said. "It behooves us to have you be better. It behooves us to have you be the best. It doesn't behoove us for you not to be good."

During a question and answer period, Ken Sloan, head of Oconee's almost year-old Convention and Visitors Bureau, asked about state funds available to put the plan in action. The Oconee CVB hosted Wednesday's event.

Prosser said state and local accommodations tax is an excellent source of funding, but pointed out that much of the money is used in a fragmented manner. He said one of the goals of local jurisdictions should be to make the best use of that money to maximize results.

According to MacNulty (the complete plan may be accessed at www.scprt.com on the Internet) tourism in the Upstate generated $1.5 billion in 2007, supported approximately 15,000 jobs and provided almost $100 million in taxes.