Tourism spending in Oconee spikes

$47.2 million economic impact, an increase of almost 10%

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Visitors to Oconee County pumped more than $47 million into the local economy in 2010, members of the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission learned Thursday.



Shirley

The economic impact from tourism spiked almost 10 percent over the $43.4 million generated by visitors in 2009, PRT Director Phil Shirley told the group.

Shirley shared the tourism statistics from the latest state research on the Economic Impact of Travel on South Carolina Counties.

The PRT boss credited the positive numbers to the work being done by the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau to promote local tourism. The CVB was created three years ago.

"It's exciting to see an increase in tourism spending," Shirley said. "Tourism is economic development. We're making a difference, definitely."

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TOURISM: Also generated 420 jobs in Oconee

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Shirley and CVB Executive Director Ken Sloan are non-voting members of the PRT Commission.

Tourism spending in Oconee has increased more than 27 percent since 2005 when the state began compiling information by county, Shirley said.

Tourism also generated 420 jobs in Oconee and produced almost $6 million in local and state tax revenues in 2010.

In other developments, the PRT Commission set a deadline of Feb. 15 for groups to apply for grants.

The Commission voted to award up to $20,000 from Accommodations Tax money.

Grants are given to help local events that attract the most out-of-town visitors.

Shirley reported a local ATAX balance of $97,124 and just less than $2,000 of state ATAX money. ATAX money also is used to fund the CVB's budget.

The Commission awarded $45,000 during the first round of ATAX grants in the fall, The group intends to award grants twice during the fiscal year, rather than in quarterly intervals as was done in the past.

Shirley recommended that $60,000 to $65,000 in grants be given each fiscal year. He said the group could try splitting that amount evenly between the two grant cycles.

"We'd have to feel our way to see how it goes," he said.

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