Tourism study to profile visitors to Oconee County

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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CLEMSON — Tourism researchers at Clemson University are ready to roll up their sleeves and work on a study that tracks the spending habits of visitors to Oconee County.

Lorraine Lobascio, who holds a Ph.D. with a background in marketing, travel and tourism, is putting the final touches on a survey to be conducted through the summer and into the fall.

Bill Norman, a professor in the Department of Parks, Recreations and Tourism Management at Clemson University, said Tuesday that he and Lobascio, a graduate assistant, would personally oversee the "Visitor Profile" study for Oconee County.

The researchers plan to canvass visitors at festivals and events in the county through October, Lobascio said.

One event coming up where you're likely to see Lobascio and Norman following visitors is the Chattooga River Festival. The June 23 event includes an all-day music lineup, local art, crafts, food and more at the Chattooga Belle Farm on Highway 76 in Long Creek.

Researchers also will seek out visitors at Hillbilly Days in Mountain Rest, Apple Festival in Westminster and Walhalla's Oktoberfest.

Ken Sloan, the head of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is commissioning the survey, said the researchers also would canvass destinations points in the county such as Devils Fork State Park on the shores of Lake Joscassee near Salem, Duke Energy's World of Energy on Highway 130, Stumphouse Tunnel and Issaqueena Falls on Highway 28, wildwater rafting on the Chattooga in Long Creek, and the Oconee County Heritage Center in Walhalla.

Norman said he and Lobascio would be shooting for a sample of 800 interviews for the study that would paint a profile of who is visiting Oconee, where they come from, who are they with, how long they stay and whether they found out about the area on Facebook or other social medial platforms.

Lobascio said she tries very hard not to interrupt people as they are having fun, and waits to talk to them during a lull in the activities.

Researchers will use iPads to conduct the survey, which allows them to quickly upload data into the computer.

The Oconee County Council approved contributing $5,000 from Accommodations Tax money to help pay for the $10,000 study. Sloan said Seneca is contributing $1,500, Westminster is pitching in with $2,500 and another $1,000 is coming from the CVB budget.

Sloan said the results of the study would make an indispensable marketing tool.

"Marketing is driven by research," Sloan said.

Sloan said he intends to share the results of the study.

"I want to share marketing knowledge with the entire community," he said.

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