Turtles creep into downtown Pickens

Project aims to attract visitors, educate

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Turtles have taken over downtown Pickens.

They can be spotted almost everywhere — checking out local restaurants and businesses, hanging near historic sites and even relaxing in the fountain at Legacy Square.

It's all part of Pickens Turtles on the Town, a project similar to Mice on Main in Greenville.

The venture is designed to attract visitors downtown, or uptown as some call it now, while also educating students and others about the need for clean water and its effect on animal habitats.

"We've already had some great feedback about it being an activity that families can do together," said Pickens City Administrator Katherine Brackett.

"It's good for the businesses," Brackett said. "It will drive people right to their front door."

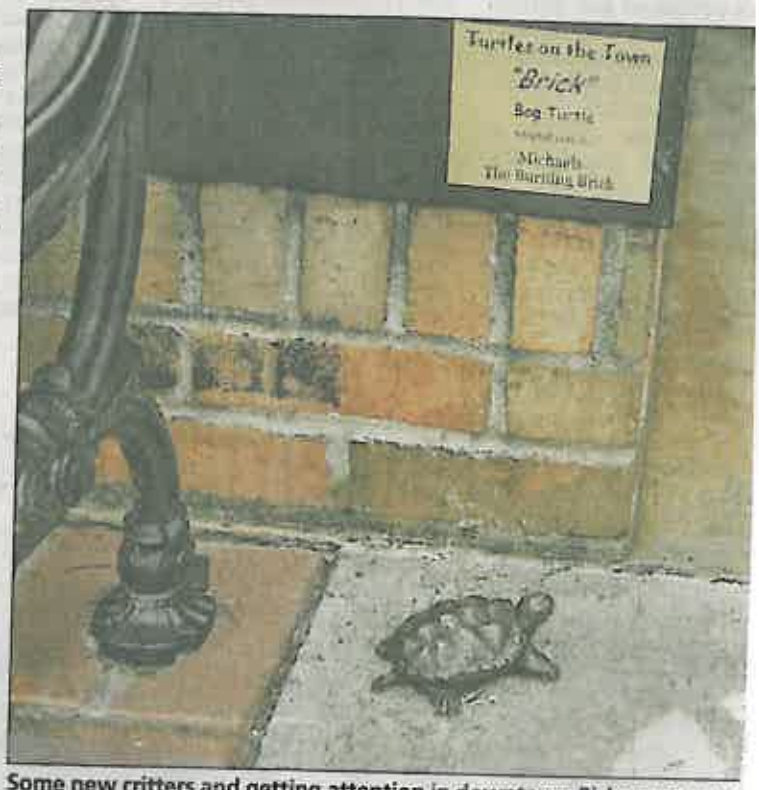
Pickens Middle School teachers Louise Hope and Susan Hilyer headed up the project along with their students and partnered with the city of Pickens, area businesses and residents to create Turtles on the Town.

Hope, who teaches community education at Pickens Middle, said small, bronze sculptures of different turtle species native to South Carolina can be found at 12 locations throughout the downtown area.

"We thought we'll be different from the Mice on Main and make each turtle unique. Each turtle out there is different," she said.

All the turtles have been installed except for the one that will go at the new Pickens Middle School, which is under construction, Hope said. The old

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Some new critters and getting attention in downtown Pickens as part of "Turtles on the Town." PATRICK COLLARD/STAFF

Pickens High is being converted into the new Pickens Middle.

She said Zan Wells, who created the Mice on Main sculptures, was the artist for this project as well.

Hilyer, who taught science strategies last year at Pickens Middle and will teach seventh-grade science this year, said the project was "completely community-sponsored."

Money came from businesses, residents and others who sponsored turtles as well as from donations and fundraising, including the sale of T-shirts and jewelry students designed, advertising on the back of the walking brochure and donations to have names listed in the back of a coloring book that is being created, Hope said.

Hilyer said more than 25 species of turtles live in South Carolina, and sponsors could choose from several that she and her sixth-grade students picked out. The sponsors also were able to name the turtle.

Amy Barrett, owner of Michael's Restaurant and The Burning Brick, sponsored one of the turtles – a Bog Turtle named Brick that sits in front of her restaurants on Main Street.

"Pickens needs some things to bring people into the downtown area, and when they came up with this idea to give people a reason to walk around town and look I thought that I wanted to be a part of it," Barrett said.

"We've already had some people who've gotten the map and gone through checking it out," she said.

The turtle project is just one example of efforts underway to help revitalize the area.

Brackett said others include streetscape efforts, plans for an amphitheater park, a façade grant program for downtown businesses and a market analysis and citywide wayfinding sign plan that were done by Main Street South Carolina.

Faye Padgett, a board member for the Pickens Revitalization Association, said they are planning events and activities to bring people in, trying to improve the area's appearance and attracting retail merchants that would be a good fit for the area.

Padgett, who is the owner of Nestfeathers, an art gallery and gift shop in downtown Pickens, said Turtles on the Town could have a positive impact on businesses.

"You'd be amazed at how many people are already participating, walking around town looking for the turtles," she said. "It gets people into town, gives them something to do, and hopefully they'll wander into the shops along the way."

Hope said the walking tour starts at Legacy Square. She said students designed a free walking brochure for the tour, which can be picked up at sponsoring businesses.

Brackett said the brochure is also on the city's website, www.cityofpickens.com.

The turtles are at locations throughout downtown, including historic sites, in front of sponsoring businesses and at other prime spots. Brackett said the city, along with Hilyer and Hope, helped spruce up a few of the areas, such as adding benches or flower pots.

At Legacy Square, four Red-eared Sliders can be found perched on a log in the fountain. The other locations have one turtle each, such as a Snapping Turtle or Mud Turtle.

Hilyer said students remember activities they do "out of school, out of the ordinary, away from the textbook," from dissecting a frog to a project like this.

Hope said, "We feel it's so important for the students not only to give back to the community but to make learning real life."

She said it's esse[illegible]r students to take pride in where they live.

Hilyer said students also wrote and illustrated a book containing stories about how the turtles got from their native habitat to Pickens, which is being edited now, and created a coloring book with the turtles and information about them.

The coloring book will be printed soon, and the storybook will likely be printed after the first of the school year. Both will be for sale, Hilyer said.

She said fundraising will be an ongoing effort.

They will use money raised to publish the storybook and create a fund in case there are issues where turtles or plaques need to be repaired or replaced.

Hilyer said there is also talk of continuing the project with Tour de Turtle, which would include areas that are farther away but that people could bike or drive to such as Hagood Mill and Table Rock State Park.

Hope said, "Our community is special. People are interested in the history of the area and appreciating why we're here. It's almost like a generational thing – we need to pass that on to the students and to their kids so they understand the area."