Upstate remains 'a best-kept secret'

More money sought for major push to tell region's story to tourists

By Jenny Munro
STAFF WRITER
jmunro@greenvillenews.com

Greenville and the Upstate have the product — events and destinations — but the area lacks awareness outside the region, tourism officials from several other cities said.

The problem for the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau is the lack of money for marketing, Chris Stone, president, said following the group's 26th annual meeting. With a 2010-2011 budget of $1.7 million, he has $225,000 for marketing.

"We remain mired in a strategy of a best-kept secret," he said.

In cities such as Charleston; Ashville, N.C., and Lexington, Ky., $1 million or more is spent on marketing and advertising, said CVB leaders in those areas.

The Upstate could claim a share of the state-matched Destination Fund, Stone said. That fund matches local private funds raised through $1 to hotel room fees. Ten hotels in Greenville have agreed to add the fee, raising about $180,000 annually.

That money will be used to attract more conventions, generating more business for hotels, he said. But it's not enough to attract matching funds — that requires $500,000 in private funds that the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism can then match with $250,000.

Stone is seeking more hotel participation, but "the hotel community needs to see that the money can generate new business," Stone said.

The occupancy rate in the Greenville area now is in the low 60 percent of rooms filled. That's up from last year but less than the normal mid- to high 60s, he said. Nationwide, the rate is around 70 percent, but Greenville is primarily a business destination with empty rooms on weekends.

The impact of more travel business can be substantial, said Bill Ward, Clemson University professor of applied economics and statistics. And the reward would be much larger than the risk, he said.

"There is product here. There is a place worth visiting. I walk Main Street every day I'm here. We hear the oohs and aahs," he said, adding he also hears visitors say they stumbled on downtown Greenville.

When looking at hotel and restaurant expenditures as a ratio of personal income, Greenville ranks at 4.55, slightly better than the national average at 4.4.

However, Fayetteville County, which includes Lexington, Ky., comes in at 6.2 while Asheville/Buncombe County is 7.36 and Charleston is double the national average at 9.1. Lexington/Richland/Columbia ranks 5.08 and Horry/Myrtle Beach leads the state at 17.48.

"We've made the big investments, the hard part, the public-private investments," Ward said. "What we need to do now is low risk and high return."

Landing Southwest Airlines will help with awareness of the Upstate as a destination, Stone said.

Charleston has spent "real marketing dollars," said Helen Hill, executive director of the Charleston CVB. "The buzz in Charleston didn't just happen."

Hill said Greenville's downtown "can create a buzz with its sense of energy and happenings."

Mary Quinn Ramer, vice president for tourism marketing at the Lexington CVB, said Greenville has a "tremendous product." This was her first visit to Greenville, and Main Street wowed her.