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Upstate urged to tap more tourism dollars

State outlines ways to increase visitors' stay

By Anna Simon
CLEMSON BUREAU
asimon@greenvillenews.com

CLEMSON — Unlocking the "untapped potential" of the Upstate is the first step in a plan to boost the economic impact of tourism in South Carolina from $17.2 billion to $40 billion annually by the year 2020.

"This is one of the areas of the state that has the most potential for growth," said Chad Prosser, director of the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, who made appearances in Clemson, Seneca and Spartanburg on Wednesday to roll out the state tourism plan.

The six counties of the Upstate currently generate 15 percent of the tourism dollars, he said.

Recommendations for the six counties of the Upstate — the first of eight regional plans to be rolled out — capitalize on the outdoor lake and mountain environment, development of cultural- and heritage-related attractions and promotion of urban hubs including Greenville, Spartanburg and Anderson and small town clusters.

The goal is to slow visitors down by providing more and deeper activities to entice them to stay longer — converting half-day outings to full days and day trips to overnight trips, said Peter MacNulty, managing director of Dublin, Ireland-based Tourism Development International, the study consultant.

For example, one recommendation calls for relocation of parking areas at Caesars Head to the other side of U.S. 276 so the existing visitors' area can be enhanced with more picnic facilities and viewing platforms and the addition of cantilevered boardwalks and displays.

Other suggestions included creation of a kayaking and canoeing center at Keowee-Toxaway Natural Area and greater and easier public access to Upstate lakes, streams, waterfalls and other waterways.

Themed day trip routes would highlight various aspects of Upstate heritage and culture such as arts and crafts, farm life and Native American and U.S. history.

Currently the Upstate has many tourism-related efforts, but they aren't coordinated, McNulty said.

He estimated a cost of $100 million to make the recommended improvements and said everyone must be on board for this to work. Much of the money is already available, and it would be a matter of more coordinated spending, Prosser said.

Reaction was mixed.

"We've got to think regionally," said Bob Brookover, director of the International Institute for Tourism Research and Development at Clemson University.

Anne Sheriff, curator at the Central History Museum, said she fears the marketing push would benefit areas north of State 11 and towns like Central, south of the scenic highway route, would be forgotten.

Rick Cotton, Clemson city administrator, said many visitors would enjoy the mountains by day but don't want to "pitch a tent and sleep on the ground," and that would increase stays in local hotels.