Work starts on new park

Amphitheater will serve as recreation, entertainment draw

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PICKENS — Work has started on the first phase of a downtown amphitheater park that will serve as a recreation and entertainment outlet to draw residents and tourists to the area.

"We're trying to build our retail base. We're trying to build our restaurant base. On top of that, we need to build entertainment, too," Pickens City Administrator Katherine Brackett said.

"We truly believe that the downtown is the heart of a city, and we need to preserve it and we need to restore life and business back to it so that it can be prosperous and help the city moving forward," Brackett said.

The amphitheater park is being created on 5.5 acres on West Main Street near Ann Street.

Pickens City Council has awarded an approximately $386,000 contract to Durham Greene, Inc. for the construction of the first phase, which will include paving the major front parking lot, building the main amphitheater structure, but not completing it, and doing site cleanup and preparation, landscaping, electrical work and decorative lighting, Brackett said.

"We're trying to provide recreation, entertainment for not only just the people that live here but all the tourists that are coming through, that are coming to visit the state parks and lakes and the mountains," she said.

"We want more reasons for people to come to Pickens," Brackett said. "It's all about building an experience that will get tourists here and keep them here."

Over three phases, the park plan calls for an amphitheater, green space, open-air pavilion, trails and boardwalks, parking areas, and possibly an outdoor classroom area.

Faye Padgett, owner of Nestfeathers, an art gallery and gift shop in downtown Pickens, said the amphitheater park is "an excellent idea" that will help bring more people into the area, which in turn will bring people into the businesses, merchants and restaurants.

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"We're just all very excited and looking forward to the completion, especially with it being completed by the Azalea Festival and spring," she said. "I think that we'll get a lot more people into the area."

Padgett, who is also a board member for the Pickens Revitalization Association, said they are making "a lot of progress" with efforts to improve the downtown area and make Pickens a destination and "a place that people will want to come to visit and to shop."

She said merchants have started an event called Third Fridays where participating merchants stay open from 6-9 p.m. on the third Friday of each month.

A bluegrass band goes around to the different locations of the participating merchants and plays, and refreshments are served, Padgett said.

Brackett said construction on the first phase of the downtown amphitheater park started last week and is set to be completed by April 15 in time for the Azalea Festival.

The total price tag for the first phase is $430,000, which includes construction as well as engineering, surveying and other costs, she said.

Brackett said $400,000 is coming from a $2 million hospitality bond the city issued for recreation initiatives. City Council approved the use of the other $30,000 from the operating hospitality tax fund.

To save around $50,000, plans were tweaked to bring the amphitheater closer to Main Street. The change means a retaining wall won't be needed.

Mayor David Owens said moving the amphitheater toward Main Street is a better plan.

"I think it will be used more like for the Azalea Festival and other functions," Owens said. "People on Main Street will be able to see it."

Later phases of the downtown amphitheater park will be completed when more funding is available, Brackett said. She said officials will research grant opportunities.

"The next big phase will be the open-air pavilion and the top on the amphitheater," Brackett said.