

Pickens County refreshing its attractions, tourism plan

Director of tourism and special events for Pickens County is bringing new approach to marketing mill and county museum, offering upgraded auditorium as community space

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LIBERTY—Jay Pitts has been busy since taking over Pickens County's tourism efforts in May, and the last week may have been his busiest yet.

He organized the Aug. 17 ribbon cutting and showcase at the newly christened Pickens County Performing Arts Center, formerly called the Liberty Civic Auditorium. Miss America Savvy Shields, past Miss South Carolina contestants and other performers showed up to help raise over \$22,000 for the Children's Miracle Network.

Four days later, Pitts and Southern Wesleyan officials hosted nearly 5,000 people at

the county's Eclipse 2017 party on the university's campus in Central—but only after a long weekend of making sure there were enough eclipse glasses, bottles of water and other essentials.

"That Friday (Aug. 18), I had to go from crowns to port-a-johns to get ready for the eclipse," Pitts joked.

A Greenville native and 1979 graduate of J.L. Mann High School, Pitts spent much of his professional life in Columbia. He worked in fundraising and development at the University of South Carolina—his college alma mater—then moved on to administrative posts with the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

There was also a stretch as the South Car-

olina State Museum Foundation's executive director, as well as board service with the state's Athletic Hall of Fame. And that's not nearly all of his nonprofit work.

"All of my life, I've been around the Miss South Carolina organization and I'm on the Board of Directors and serve as executive producer every year," Pitts said. "I've seen 36 Miss Americas crowned."

Palmetto Boys State is Pitts' real passion, however. He runs the media and performing arts for the annual gathering on the Anderson University campus. He also handles band performances, news programs, video production and more.

then we're going to rent it out ... the phone is ringing; there won't be a problem with bookings."

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More about Pitts' role
Pickens County hired Jay Pitts this spring to serve as tourism director and overhaul promotion and operation of local attractions. His new brief includes:

Hagood Mill Historic Site and Hagood Creek Petroglyph Site are located off S.C. 178 north of Pickens, the mill site offer glimpses into 19th and early 20th farm life in southern Appalachia, while the adjacent petroglyph site features prehistoric rock carvings left by Native Americans.

Pickens County Museum in downtown Pickens is housed in a century-plus old jail. The museum's collection spans from prehistory to current events, with art by local artists, gardens and a shop.

Pickens County Performing Arts Center can be found in downtown Liberty on S.C. 93. The 650-seat center hosts concerts, plays and other performances in an old middle/high school auditorium space recently renovated and updated.

the Pickens County Performing Arts Center, Hagood Mill Historic Site north of Pickens and the county museum in Pickens are all his responsibility now, plus the county's Visit Pickens website. He's happy to let Billy Crawford continue running the Hagood site as he has been — "I'm not going to slow Billy down one bit" — but Pitts does have some educational programming ideas he wants to explore at some point there and at the museum. A website overhaul is likely, too.

Pitts' main focus thus far has been an ongoing refit of the performing arts center to better accommodate corporate meetings, local gatherings, film showings, music concerts and more. He praised the prior County Council for having the foresight to transform the old middle and high school auditorium. He said the new council is merely letting him get on with the work of making it into a "community space" rather than a "government-owned space."

"What I need to do now is outfit it with state of the art equipment," Pitts explained. "We're going to have at least eight to 10 shows here in the next eight to 10 months; and

"I went to Boys State as a junior and it changed my life and put me on a direction I followed for the rest of my life," said Pitts. "I went in '78 from J.L. Mann and I'm still on the staff there to this day ... It is a very, very big part of my life."

The varied curriculum vitae and nonprofit work over the years made him amenable to overtures to become the new director of tourism and special events for Pickens County.

"I didn't think about it when the job offer came," Pitts said. "Sometimes you just know it's the right thing to do ... I had two job offers on the table, and one paid a whole lot more than this one, but this was a perfect fit for me. I feel like I've given back all of my life in the world of production. I've given as volunteer and not been paid for it. I'm finally doing something I want to do and I'm being paid for it."

The approach was part of an effort by newly elected Pickens County Council members and Administrator Gerald Wilson to improve management of county-owned attractions after previous controversies over how funding was handled.