Forum a first step in tourism master plan

USC study will identify county attractions and how to promote them

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These were among the many attractions some 40 people came up with during the first of three public meetings seeking input into a University of South Carolina "tourism blueprint" study. The two other meetings will take place Thursday in Elgin and Nov. 29 in Bethune.

The meeting was led by Dr. Rich Harrill, director of USC's International Tourism Research Institute (ITRI) at the school's School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management, who was hired by Kershaw County to conduct the study. Harrill described Tuesday's meeting as a large brainstorming session. It was attended by members of Camden City Council, Kershaw County Council, Kershaw County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, Historic Camden and Camden Tree Foundation as well as representatives of the county's equine industry, local businesses and government employees.

Participants spent the first 45 minutes of the one-and-a-half-hour session working in small groups to fill out a 10-page "asset inventory evaluation," as Harrill called it.

"It's the most important part of the process," Harrill said as he opened the session. "It helps us identify things that otherwise would go overlooked. This will help us get down deep to identify things we might not have thought of.

Some people worked in pairs, others in groups as large as six or seven, occasionally getting up to switch to other groups.

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session, Harrill asked those assembled to identify what they thought were the big things about Camden and Kershaw County that would surprise outsiders... things that locally are taken for granted. He wrote them down on a large pad propped on an easel.

"If I don't get off I-20 -- even if I do, but I don't stop at any of the shops -- I wouldn't know this is an historic town. I wouldn't know about the horse community," said National Steeplechase Museum Director Hope Cooper.

Others mentioned the area's natural, "not-yet-overdeveloped" beauty.

"The things that attract tourists, the quality of life here, also attract retirees and industry," agreed Harrill.

Someone mentioned Jammin' in July, the Carolina Downhome Blues Festival and the Bluejeans, Bluegrass, Barbecue and Oysters event.

"Why shouldn't Kershaw County be known as the musical county of the Midlands?" asked Harrill.

Still others talked about the number of art exhibits and theater productions at the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County and art galleries around Camden.

"Art is huge, and shopping is the number one tourist activity in the U.S.," Harrill said, "and historic tourism is number two."

Lisa Boykin Adams, owner of Lisa B. Studios, said the sheer size of the equine industry in Kershaw County likely surprises outsiders.

"I don't think many people realize how much of that is here," she said, and Sherry Pace, of the Camden Equestrian Center and Entertainment Complex added, "We have international, Olympic-level horse training that goes on here."

That prompted Harrill to note that Kershaw County is part of a global community now. "Towns are not just competing on a regional level anymore. It's easy to hop on a plane and travel to another country," he said.

Adams also said she believed downtown Camden had underutilized spaces and thought more needed to be done to encourage the use of secondary spaces in the downtown business district.

"There's an empty building next door to me and the owner can't do anything with it because it's so difficult to bring up to code," said Adams.

Brad Field, a member of the Camden Tree Foundation, also said there needs to be an emphasis on downtown Camden.

"But we also need to discourage development outside of town," he said.

And S.C. Rep. Laurie Slade Funderburk said she believed the city of Camden's upcoming wireless Internet project would draw people to rent or buy empty buildings.

Kershaw County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Buddy Clark said water -- in the form of access to the Wateree River and Lake Wateree -- impacts recreation and fishing, among other pursuits. Harrill said he had visited a number of communities that mention water as an asset but don't appear to have the same level of access as Camden and Kershaw County.

Agnes Corbett, director of the Camden Museum and Archives, said the site, currently undergoing renovations, is considered a research center in the Midlands. She noted that an employee of EDAW, the international firm hired by Greenwood Development Corporation to study 3,500 acres of Lake Wateree property, is under contract to purchase, spent two days at the archives recently. Harrill said stories like that highlight the difference between local museums that emphasize big, flashy displays and those that lend themselves to genealogical and other research.

"I don't think people do enough to promote things like family reunions," said Harrill. "People who have moved away from communities like this want to show their kids where they came from. They want to show them that vegetables didn't just come from the back of a truck but from the ground."

He called that kind of community promotion "agri-tourism."

Camden City Councilwoman Alfred Mae Drakeford said she hoped the Price House could be used as an African-American museum, becoming part of the evolving Camden Trace project headed by the Kershaw County Clean Community Commission.

"We had an event at the FAC a couple of years ago. I was amazed at the number of (African-American) artifacts people brought," said Drakeford.

Pace said she would like to see something that would incorporate Camden and Kershaw County's three main characteristics: The visual arts, history and horses. She suggested commissioning elaborate horse statues.

"A sense of place is extremely important," said Harrill in response to Pace's idea.

Harrill said he conducted a number of other similar studies while employed at Georgia Tech's Economic Development Institute's Tourism and Regional Assistance Centers (TRACS). Most have been conducted in Georgia; at least one was conducted in mainland China. One of the Georgia studies involved small, rural Heard County.

According to Georgia.gov, the official Georgia state government Web site, Heard County is only 296.1 square miles in size with a 2000 Census population of just over 11,000 -- far smaller than Kershaw County. But the project the county proposed was large: Creating a 40-mile greenway, TRACS -- and Harrill -- was hired to turn the greenway into a tourism asset by pretty much doing what he is doing here. He conducted an asset inventory, economic impact analysis, a survey of similar greenways and a "lifestyle segmentation" which, according to the Wharton School of Business, is the separation of consumers into groups, based on their hobbies, interests, and other aspects of their lifestyles.

Harrill made nine recommendations to Heard County, ranging from developing and providing access to nature-based attractions to improving signage throughout the county.

He has also assisted with feasibility studies for Georgia's Hidden Isles Parkway; a woodpecker trail along Georgia Route 121; the Lake Hartwell area, comprising Stephens, Franklin and Hart counties, centered around the town of Toccoa; and gauging attitudes toward tourism development in Charleston.

Harrill said the Kershaw County tourism study would be completed in about six to seven months. He said data compiled from the asset inventories from all three public meetings would be used in an economic impact study.

"We'll then need to develop a market profile of a 'model' visitor -- someone who's most likely to visit the area," said Harrill.

Thursday's public meeting will begin at 6 p.m. at the Elgin branch of the Kershaw County Library. The meeting Nov. 29 will also begin at 6 p.m. at the Bethune Woman's Club.

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