

Psst — Greenville's worth a visit

To attract more tourists, tight-budgeted CVB launches word-of-mouth campaign

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Tana Thomas had never considered Greenville to be a vacation destination but is planning a trip here this summer.

She was part of a group of couples, Atlanta residents who are empty nesters, who visited Greenville as part of the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau's effort to attract that niche market to the city.

"I was blown away. That trip was one of the best experiences

I've ever had," Thomas said. "Main Street is so charming. The piece de resistance is that park with the waterfall. I was enthralled with the whole town."



Stone is alerting their friends: Stone would like to see a word-of-mouth promotion of his Back Stage Pass tourism program, which is directed at Atlanta empty nesters, take off. Traditional promotion "costs you money. We don't have the money. How do we do this? — by word of mouth," he said. "We know we can be successful." Until he finds financing for traditional program promotion — about \$1.1 million — word-of-mouth advertising is all he has. "It is certainly a unique and creative approach to attracting leisure visitors," said Fenton Overdyke, vice president of

Stone likes. Thomas, a flight attendant, has seen enough cities to compare them with Greenville. And the couple

is alerting their friends:

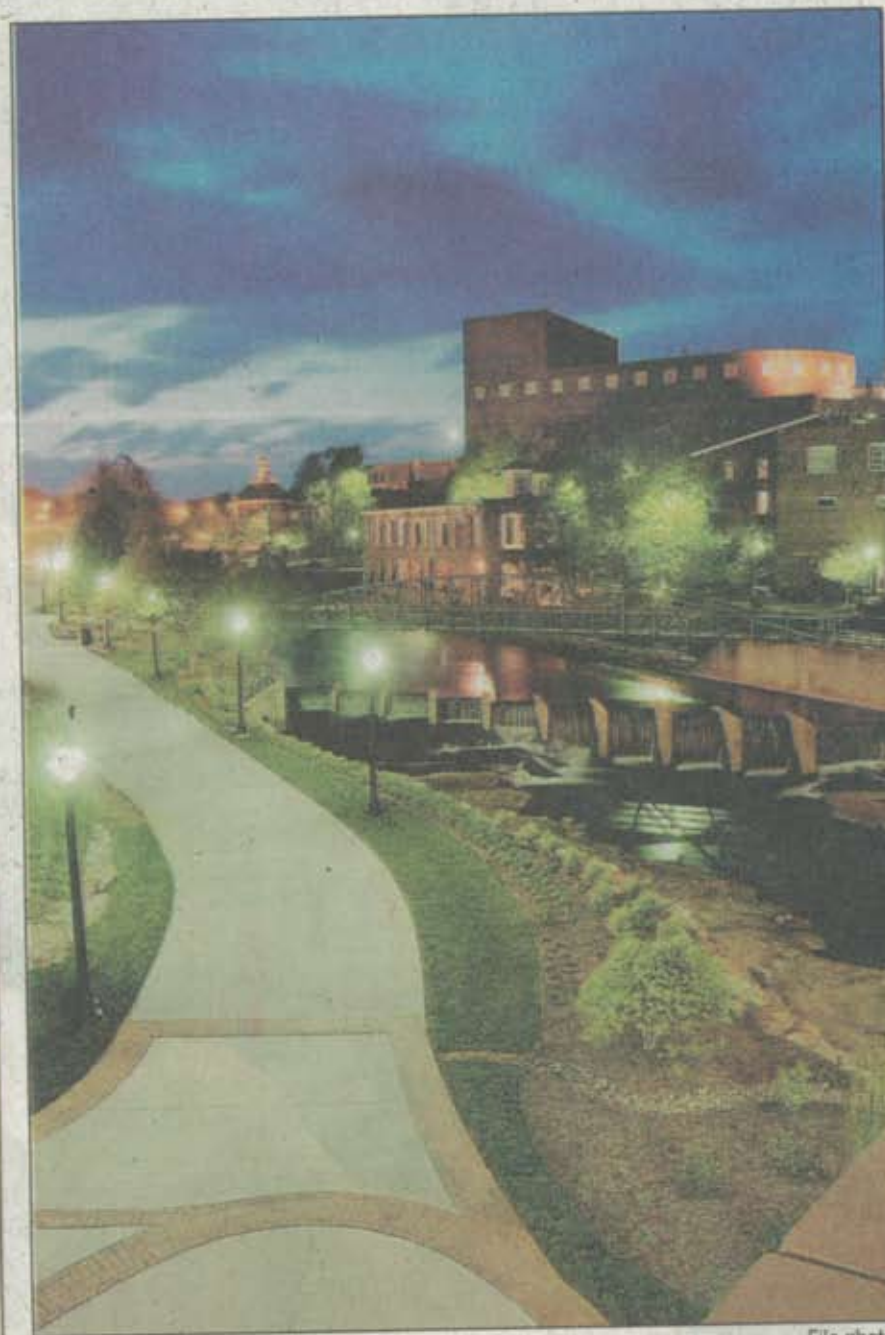
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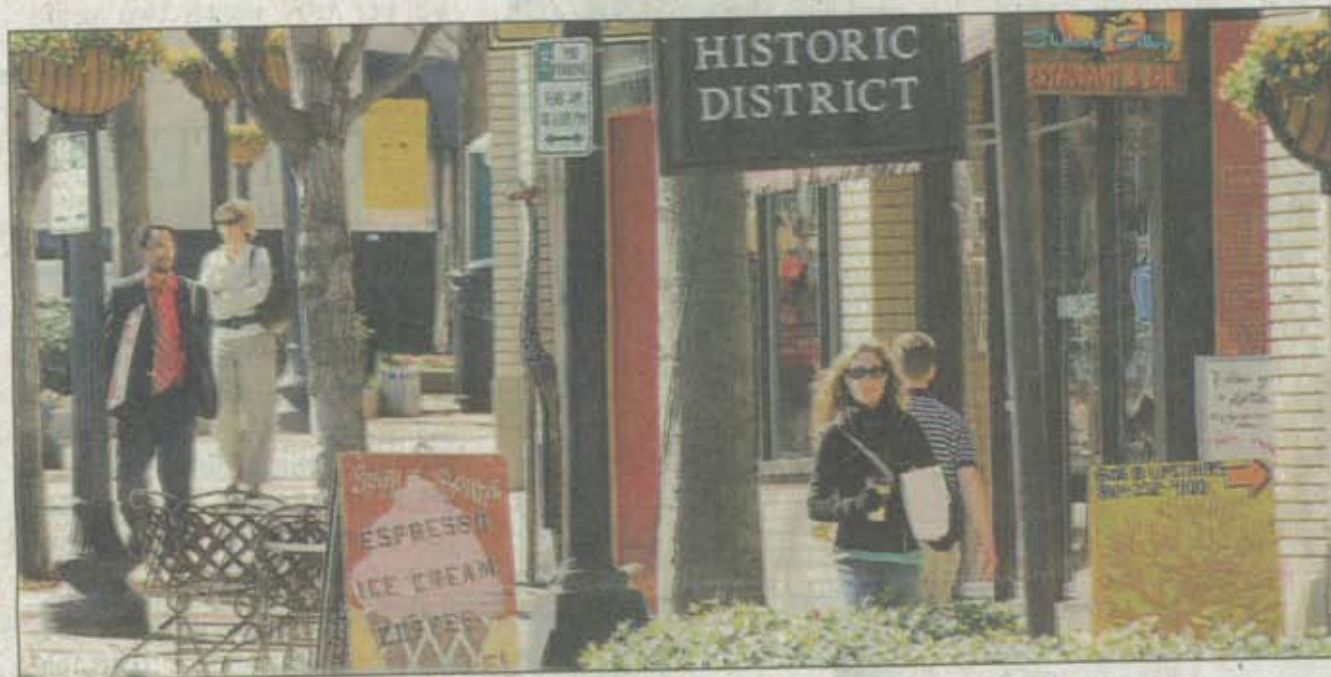
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File photos



The word is out: With an attractive riverscape, above, and shopping areas, left, downtown Greenville is developing a tourist trade.

CVB

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Market Search, a Columbia market research firm. "As a brand, Greenville is known for

its vibrant business community, but it is not really thought of as a leisure tourism destination."

To bump up Greenville's tourism base, the numbers need to grow quickly, Stone said.

And that's hard. He said he

needs to spread the knowledge of Greenville as a tourism destination for couples on their own, in the 50 to 65 age range, who are looking for a little outdoor adventure, fun downtown, shopping, fine dining and fine arts. That's the niche market the Back Stage Pass weekend is targeting.

The weekend destination program also offers a lot to the Greenville area, he said. Magellan Strategy Group, based in Asheville, N.C., projects that a successful Backstage Pass program, with traditional promotion, could generate more than \$1.6 million in additional taxes for the region.

By the fourth year of the program, more than 1,902 additional hotel room nights could be sold annually and weekend occupancy could increase from 62 percent to 74 percent. That increase could generate \$8.4 million more in annual room revenue.

One way to fund the program would be to tap into a \$10 million pool of funding that the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism has for marketing and promotion. It requires a \$2 private sector match for every \$1 of public funding.

Although coastal areas are obtaining the funding, "Greenville is not participating in that,"



File photo

A robust entertainment schedule, from outdoor theater, above, to weekly concerts and weekend festivals, keeps pedestrians flowing along and through Greenville streets and parks.



File photo

One of downtown Greenville's tourism draws is its large number of restaurants — many with outdoor seating.

Stone said. He suggested that hotels could voluntarily add a \$1 destination fee to their bills, generating funding that could be used as a match.

Also, the local hospitality tax revenues could be tapped.

"I think it would be a smart strategy to use some of these dollars for marketing," he said.

Until a funding source is found, plans are to continue to test the Backstage Pass program over another two weekends during the next fiscal year, he said.

Stone said he believes the timing is right to get some sort of program going.

"I sense a whole new mindset as it relates to tourism and the kind of opportunity it presents," he said.

The first test market for Back Stage Pass is Atlanta because of its proximity to Greenville — about a two-hour drive. If the program is successful, couples in Charlotte and Raleigh/Durham, N.C., and Knoxville, Tenn., could be targeted. Other cities, such as Charleston and Birmingham, Ala., also are possibilities.

A test drive of the concept was held on two weekends last September. A total of 35 couples came for the all-expenses-paid weekend, said Lauren Posta, CVB marketing manager.

The two weekends cost about \$40,000, with hotels and restaurants providing complimentary meals and lodging as part of the test package, Stone said. Included in the weekend were downtown strolls; a guided outdoor adventure that could be hiking, kayaking or driving at the BMW Performance Center; arts or entertainment such as a performance or baseball, and a tour — including behind the scenes visits at Heritage Green.

"Before only about 15 percent thought of Greenville as a weekend getaway," Posta said.

"After the weekend experience, we had overwhelming two-thumbs-up comments," Stone said, with everyone of

those replying to the survey saying they would consider Greenville as a get-away destination.

MarketSearch surveyed the couples and found Greenville received high marks in several categories:

- Being a fun and exciting place to visit
- The downtown area
- Having the kinds of restaurants you like
- Having the kinds of shops and boutiques you like

There were some logistical complaints and a request for more time to just wander around downtown.

"People are looking for newness and freshness," Stone said, and Greenville offers that.

"We have had five or six come back, some with friends and family in tow," Posta said, so the word-of-mouth is slowly spreading.

"We're planning to come back this summer and go to Lake Jocassee," Thomas said.

CVB officials would like to see a certification program for Back Stage Pass venues — hotels, restaurants, museums and other tourism-related activities, he said. It would be something similar to the Michelin guidebooks "must-see" attractions.

Stone and Posta said the Back Stage Pass weekends also would meld with the proposed Go Experience downtown and the Blue Wall at the old Camp Spearhead location on State 11. Plans, designs and cost analyses of both facilities could be completed by the fall, Stone said. Renderings would be available at that time. Construction could begin in 2008 and the two tourism locales could open in 2010.