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'Headline' events help our community thrive

By Doug McGrath

December 26, 2008 11:16 AM

The Greenville News editorial recognizing the efforts to bring the Davis Cup tennis event to the Upstate, as well as the value events of this magnitude contribute to the area, is very much appreciated for a number of reasons. I believe these type "headline" events are important to keeping our community thriving and prosperous and to help establish the area's resources as tourism sites.

Having events of this caliber in our community provides an important aspect of what I believe is an enviable quality of life for its citizens. It's pretty cool seeing George Clooney, Kurt Russell, Renee Zellweger, Catherine Bell, Wayne Gretzky and other celebrities walking around downtown.

We have seen the "Tiger Woods of bass fishing," Kevin VanDam, dining at one of our wonderful restaurants during the Bassmaster Classic. We see George Hincapie, a world class cyclist and Tour de France stage winner, racing in his hometown. We have Jay Haas, one of the classiest gentlemen in professional golf and the Champions Tour Player of the Year for a record three years in a row, living here with his family and being active behind the scenes in many charities. We have the opportunity of mingling with world-renowned chefs who participate in Euphoria and have the pleasure of listening to Edwin McCain croon tunes recognized the world over.

We can watch professional golfers compete in the BMW Charity Pro Am and young baseball players play in the Big League World Series. Greenville has earned the honor as being one of The 100 Best Art Towns in America, quite a distinction considering the size of our town.

These types of events provide a tremendous economic windfall for the Upstate as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars in media coverage. That exposure helps drive people's attention our way, and that leads to spending and ultimately new business development. If none of these events existed or none of the honors were awarded, how would that affect hotel occupancy, restaurants, economic development and on our quality of life?

Events that create the "Upstate is Cool" buzz, generate the "wow" comment, elicit the "I was blown away" response, and perhaps most importantly fit the landscape of the Upstate, are the ones we want to create, host and keep. As we look for other opportunities that fit our community, we realize the Upstate has a diverse economic and technology base. Can we use those assets for building more economic revenue opportunities?

For instance, the area is home to a vast array of automotive companies and has developed a world-class Center for Automotive Research that enhances the Upstate's reputation as an automotive industry center of advancement. How about an open wheel car race (think Indy Racing League or maybe even Formula One.)? Talk about the "cool" factor! Having an aviation show would remind the community of its rich military aviation history and draw attention to the area's attempt to be part of the aviation and technology cluster the state is developing.

With the success of the Greenville Open Studio Art Festival, Euphoria, Bassmaster Classic, the bike race and other events, the Upstate is drawing the attention of more site planners for conventions, concerts, sports events and the like. We have proven the area has the resources (human, natural, and physical) to support these events. The community has demonstrated it can roll out the red carpet with good old-fashioned South Carolina hospitality with the best of them. But landing "headline" events is difficult because other regions aggressively go after these major events and have the financial resources to get them.

The state Parks, Recreation and Tourism department, our city and county governments, and Convention and Visitors Bureaus, have provided funds to help secure many events we enjoy. That is very much appreciated. However, I would like to suggest that if the state and the community really want to go after the "headline" events, new funding options need to be created.

If funding is put in place, then competing for those events will be on a level playing field and all counties in the Upstate will land their fair share. And those events will generate a positive economic impact and, I believe, contribute immeasurably to keeping our quality of life above what other cities can claim.

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