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Former national parks chief urges local investment

Staff reports

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Fran Mainella speaks at the Spartanburg Marriott at Renaissance Park Friday.

Investing in local parks and recreation can have wide-ranging benefits, the former head of the National Park Service told a Spartanburg audience Friday morning.

Fran Mainella, who now serves as a visiting scholar at Clemson University, said communities large and small that have spent money on developing their parklands have seen adjacent property values rise, neighborhoods improve, and most significantly, business relocate to those communities.

Mainella said surveys of Fortune 500 companies show important consideration given to “quality of life” factors when businesses decide whether to expand in one location to relocate elsewhere. In addition to active, well-maintained parks, she said issues such as climate, traffic, sense of security, and an educated workforce also come into play.

Many of those are the same factors that are helping fuel some retiree migration to the Carolinas, a trend Mainella said was extremely positive and beneficial. She cited that retirees generally have money to spend, require less public services and are active participants in local communities.

“They’re running away from hurricanes. They’re not going to coastal Carolina, they’re coming to the Upstate,” she said of Florida retirees who are relocating to the north.

While coincidental, Mainella’s talk on the opportunities presented by a vibrant parks system came a day after one of Spartanburg’s largest employers – the Schwan Food Company – announced it will be shuttering its 525-employee plant here in two months.

Her speech was part of the Building Our Future speaker series presented by Partners for Active Living, the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce and Upstate Forever.

Mainella, who led the national parks system from 2001 to 2006 and was the first female director of the 20,000-employee agency, said communities such as Spartanburg should build on existing successes. She cited Duncan Park, the Cottonwood Trail and Barnet Park as examples of urban parks that can provide numerous recreation opportunities for local residents and tourists alike.

Tourism is South Carolina’s largest industry, mostly fueled by coastal visitors but state and local attractions in the Upstate are playing a larger role.

Mainella said a recent study of visitors to Table Rock State Park showed in 2006 more than \$2.4 million in direct economic spending in Pickens County and a resulting \$273,000 in new tax revenue from local businesses, all tied directly to park visitors.

A more urban example is Greenville’s success with Falls Park on the Reedy River. A city study showed that while the city of Greenville invested \$13.5 million in building the riverfront park, private businesses have invested \$135 million in property adjacent to it.

With the passage in Spartanburg County of a new county hospitality tax, Mainella said the new revenue stream could lead to economic, environmental and health benefits if it results to parks that are better utilized and attractive to local residents and outside businesses considering whether to move to

Spartanburg County.

She warned that government entities can't hold the sole role in investing in outdoor recreation. As national parks chief, she created a new parks division that focused on partnerships and collaboration. She urged similar attention locally.

"Today, no one can do things alone," she said.

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