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Spartanburg unlikely to match Greenville

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It's a common refrain among proud Spartanburg County residents when trying not to covet thy neighbor: "We're not Greenville and we don't want to be Greenville!"

But if residents here are at least beginning to recognize the value of a high quality of life -- and the economic growth that can come with being able to showcase that to visitors and tourists -- then they might do well to at least throw some good will toward their neighbors' good fortune Tuesday night.

After years of lackluster funding to parks, recreation and tourism and a growing population that has overburdened existing facilities, Greenville County Council finally approved the third reading of an ordinance to "bring Greenville County parks and tourism facilities to the caliber of the programs and facilities in other great communities."

Following a 10-2 vote, they'll now bond out \$51 million and

pay it back over a number of years with a two percent "hospitality tax" on prepared food and beverages -- that is, anything consumed in restaurants that do business in the unincorporated parts of the county. The tax will generate as much as \$6.75 million a year and can be used, according to state law, only for amenities that attract tourism.

Greenville County is following the lead of most of its municipalities, which already have such a tax, in order to create a countywide network of destination parks and specialty attractions, upgrade existing parks and preserve green space -- assets that are considered integral to a community's ability to attract and retain tourism, business and industry, much less improve the well-being of its residents.

Citing similar parks and recreation funding problems between the two counties, Upstate Forever Executive Director Brad Wyche said, "I hope this will be an inspiration to Spartanburg to follow suit."

That prompts the question whether such a hospitality tax could ever fly in Spartanburg County, and more importantly, whether it would even be the best option to fix its own unique parks and recreation woes.

At first glance, County Council members seem to be wary of the concept, a mentality that reflects their brief consideration of the issue in 2003.

That's when, during a February Council meeting, Councilman David Britt said he would support the tax "if we could reduce a tax we control ... by an equal amount where it is not a tax gain."

At the next meeting in March, Britt made a motion to "table the consideration," and with a second by

Councilman Rock Adams, the idea went dead cold.

Britt is still adamant, along with incoming council members O'Neal Mintz and Dale Culbreth, that new taxes not be "unnecessarily imposed" on residents.

At least for Britt, that would ideally mean not rushing into the creation of a tax just because it works for Greenville County's goals. Spartanburg County needs to revamp its own parks and recreation vision and then spell it out in black and white, Britt says, so the public can see exactly what they'd be getting for their money.

Spartanburg County Parks and Recreation Commission Chairman Jeff Hardee agrees, saying that the last thing he and other commission members want to do is "go to the trough too many times."

Commission Director Jeff Caton says that's exactly what could happen if too much faith is put in the hospitality tax without considering Spartanburg County's unique funding philosophy that has created obstacles to parks and recreation development.

Spartanburg County ranks last among five major South Carolina counties in terms of parks and recreation funding. It had a \$2.9 million budget in 2005-2006 to keep up with an array of dilapidated and disconnected facilities, coming in behind Richland, Lexington, Greenville and Charleston counties.

Greenville County's Recreation District budget in 2005-2006 was \$7 million.

Spartanburg is also the only county out of the five to run its Parks and Recreation Commission on a virtually operational budget in the last few years, meaning little to no money has been allocated for capital improvements such as facility and equipment upgrades.

Even with a budget that has failed to meet its needs, too, the Greenville County Recreation District at least used \$4.7 million of it for capital improvements in 2005-2006.

Caton argues that Greenville County's capital has been the basis for its slow, but at least gradual facility improvement projects over the years, creating an ideal environment where modest yearly revenues from a hospitality tax can be used to enhance and keep up with growth.

Yet in Spartanburg County, "We'd need a substantial infusion of money right now (\$120 million) to develop even basic facilities," Caton said.

Immediate implementation of a two percent hospitality tax in the unincorporated portions of Spartanburg County would not yield anywhere near that figure. Data from July, 2005, indicates that about \$250 million worth of revenue could be taxed, which would create about \$5 million a year on all those take-out and sit-down meals.

Caton's fear is that a hospitality tax might create the illusion of being able to bring the county's facilities up to speed when, realistically, it is not a cure-all.

A better option, Caton and even the skeptical Councilman Britt say, might be a referendum to create a capital penny sales tax, and in the process, a larger pot of money--\$35 million a year--in a shorter period of time to kick-start parks and recreation. Unlike the hospitality tax, the capital penny sales tax by law can last no more than seven years.

If the referendum were well-written and told taxpayers exactly what projects the money were going to, Britt says the Parks and Recreation Commission could even convince him to pay a little bit more for a few

years.

And maybe that's the point:

"Let [the Parks and Recreation Commission] sell [a plan] to the public, and let the public decide how to pay for it," Britt said.

But "pay for it soon" seems to be the kick-started wisdom of the day as evidenced by Greenville County Council's action.

"Communities must find ways to tap into the enormous tourism industry," said David Cordeau, president and CEO of the Spartanburg Chamber of Commerce. "Spartanburg has a major stake in that."

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