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Consultant says Greenville has unique appeal

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BUSINESS WRITER

Greenville has a chance to use its uniqueness to attract visitors with the proposed Go Experience in downtown Greenville and the Blue Wall Center at the former Camp Spearhead site on State 11, said Victoria Dahl, managing partner of RhodesDahl.

The company, headquartered in Charleston with projects throughout the nation and in other countries, has been selected to manage the architect and exhibit designer selection and site selection for the Go Experience, said Chris Stone, Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau president. RhodesDahl also will manage negotiations with the design team, the conceptual and final designs.

"Ultimately, our job is to make this happen for you," Dahl said at the CVB annual meeting Tuesday. "Our goal is not to overwhelm this community with tourists. Tourism, if properly done, is a big enhancement of quality of life."

CVB officials have \$1.2 million of Greenville County hospitality tax funds to pay for the project management team, architectural and design fees and the cost of the financial analysis and feasibility study, he said.

Planners are aiming at an overall project of between \$10 million and \$15 million, to open in 2011, Dahl said.

That funding will come from a combination of private and public funds, Stone said, but fund-raising will not begin until designs are available.

Dahl called the Go Experience, which will focus on what is available in downtown Greenville as well as the surrounding mountains, and the Blue Wall Center, a place for outdoors recreation taking advantage of the mountains, "two very exciting projects."

R.P. Rama, an owner and vice president of JHM Hotels, likes the idea of the two projects, but he's looking for more.

"Greenville is an international city," he said. "In this diverse population, there needs to be an exchange of cultural and social events."

He said an International Festival would fit well in Greenville. It could include ethnic foods, dancing from various countries, a fashion show featuring national clothing, movies in foreign languages as well as handicrafts and arts.

"We would learn about each other's culture. You would have a purpose to go to Greenville -- to attend the International Festival," he said. "It would be like you're in Disney World. You could visit other countries without leaving Greenville."

RhodesDahl, which has been involved with the Monterrey Bay, Calif., aquarium, a ball field in Charleston and the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco among other projects, currently is reviewing 50 applications from architectural firms and exhibit design firms, an extraordinary response, she said.

"The projects have captured the imagination of the design world," she said, adding that world-famous designers are among those who have submitted proposals.

RhodesDahl is performing the economic feasibility and marketing study now, she said, and most of the data has been collected. This is to estimate how many people would be attracted to the two facilities and what they'd like to see there.

"The data is very, very positive," she said. "The only barrier to people coming to Greenville is awareness" and that can be changed through marketing.

"The Go Experience will introduce visitors to all that available," she said. "The goal is for it to be an attraction in and of itself. This will be way more than a visitors' center."

Dahl said planners hope to site the Go Experience in downtown Greenville somewhere on the Reedy River visible from Main Street. A site decision is likely by the end of the summer. The concept plan will be completed in November.

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