

Telling Sanford's story: from Second Century to SAGA's Visitor Services

Fifth of a series

EDITOR'S NOTE: How do people outside Sanford learn about Lee County's unique events and community offerings? Amidst the noise and hubbub of community market campaigns, that's no easy task – which is one reason why growing an official “visitor services program” is essential to the area's sustained evolution and success. In Part 5 of this series of stories produced by the Sanford Area Growth Alliance in conjunction with The Herald, the path from The Second Century Project (addressed in the first installment of this series) to the realization of SAGA's Visitor Services, and today's efforts to tell the Sanford story, are detailed. This series concludes with a final story on Sunday.

SANFORD – A good story is always worth telling.

That was the motivation behind Sanford's “Second Century Project” almost 10 years ago, and it still rings true today with Sanford and Lee County's burgeoning Visitor Services program.

The vision originally developed from the Second Century Project's efforts has been the guiding force for many of Sanford's economic activities – from the Sanford Area Growth Alliance and Central Carolina Enterprise Park to Streetscape and the Buggy Factory, from Lee County K-12 schools' focus on “more than just a diploma” and Central Carolina Works to Temple Theatre and San-Lee Park.

That committee of private citizens, working together back in 2008, also believed in the promotion of Sanford on a statewide and regional level. And that goal is finally coming to fruition.

While the Sanford community takes pride in its community and offerings, do others know what's brewing in Sanford? Perhaps not. Sanford, unlike most communities its size across North Carolina, has never had a visitor services program or a tourism department authority (TDA) to help promote the city or to attract guests.

But it wasn't for lack of wanting or needing one.

A much-needed service

Kelly Miller, the City of Sanford's public information officer, understands the importance of such a program.

“Visitor services,” she says, “is vital to showcase Sanford's many treasures and to allow our city to compete with other cities our size in the region.”

Developing a one-stop hub for visitors to the community has been a goal for many years, according to Sanford Mayor Chet Mann.

“City leaders knew we needed a Visitors Center in order to attract the kind of growth we desired,” he said. “They knew we needed a platform for sharing our message and letting the world outside Sanford know about us.”

Since SAGA's official inception a few years ago, the City of Sanford and Lee County have been working in tandem to develop a bona fide visitor services program. Last year, Lee County Commissioners voted to provide SAGA with \$50,000 in funding for a two-year period, seed money which helped initiate the project. In August, Sanford's Crystal McIver was hired as the first director of SAGA's Visitor Services program.

"The program coming to fruition is the result of many working on the initiative and never giving up on the importance of a visitor services program for the community," said SAGA CEO Joy Thrash, who added that research indicates every dollar invested in tourism advertising produces a return of \$17 in state and local tax revenues.

Thrash believes that visitor services not only offers visitors the opportunity to learn more about Sanford and Lee County's many activities – whether it's restaurants, arts, recreation or shopping – but it also helps with economic development. She said one never knows how a single visit or visitor may transform Sanford.

And her mantra for Sanford reiterates that belief: "Visit for the day, spend the night, stay a lifetime."

Long-term sustainability

While the city and county's commitment successfully launched the much-needed service, the program's long-term sustainability relies on a long-term funding source. The fingers of area leaders are still crossed waiting for that source – in the form of a new motel occupancy tax for the city – to be secured.

If the N.C. General Assembly doesn't approve an occupancy tax soon (now in the form of House Bill 143, proposed by Rep. John Sauls of Lee County), Thrash said the program will not be able to continue. If passed, the 3 percent tax would be levied on rental lodging in Sanford; the majority of monies generated would directly benefit SAGA's Visitor Services.

Mann noted several past efforts to secure the tax have failed for a variety of reasons – political and otherwise – but feels optimistic the measure will succeed this current legislative session.

"Long-term sustainability of the program is being derived from the city occupancy tax, which we are hopeful to receive," Mann said. "Sanford is the only town in our region that does not have a city occupancy tax."

(Lee County has an occupancy tax, but 100 percent of those monies go to the Dennis E. Wicker Civic Center.)

"Once fully operational, the Visitors Center can provide marketing and administrative support for annual events, festivals and street fairs, ultimately evolving into a full TDA," Mann said. "Advertising in state and regional publications will attract others to our area. The center is a critical piece to facilitate our growth in the future."

Even with a bright outlook, only time will tell if visitor services will soon be a reality for Sanford. If it happens, well, that'll be a story worth telling, too.