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TOURISM GRANTS HELPING PROJECTS GROW

Uniontown, PA – Since its inception, the Fayette County Tourism Grants Program has awarded more than \$4.1 million to various local and regional organizations. Established in 2008, its purpose is to increase tourism and enhance visitors' experiences in the county.

As part of a memorandum of understanding between the Fayette County Commissioners and Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, the program is funded through a portion of the county's hotel room rental excise tax. More than \$392,000 was awarded to historical, agricultural, recreational and arts efforts in February 2018.

"It's our responsibility to promote the tourism assets of Fayette County to visitors beyond the county, encouraging them to take part in our recreational activities, visit the cultural attractions, dine in our restaurants and shop in our shops," said Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau Executive Director Ann Nemanic. "There are some big projects planned, and without that lodging tax in place, those things would be difficult to do."

Through the program, the Ohiopyle Outfitters Co-op, which comprises four Ohiopyle rafting companies, has been able to increase its marketing campaign through added social media, radio and television promotions over the past three years.

"It's really increased the visitation to Ohiopyle. Not that it's not always big numbers, but the millennials are a tough group we're trying to target, and we've really diversified our marketing," said Joel Means, President & CEO of the Ohiopyle Trading Post.

Means said a previous lack of marketing assistance, coupled with the overall decline of the rafting industry, caused visitor numbers to drop, but the tourism grant program has since created an upward trend.

"Now that we're able to put those monies toward it, we've really seen the impact of our marketing dollars going to work," Means said. "They're crucial to our existence - it's that simple. We may be just selling raft trips or bike rentals, but it's bringing people in, filling the restaurants, taverns and hotels.



“When the rafters come, they spend money and book longer stays. The grant dollars are allowing us to become a better destination.”

John D. Blaney Jr., treasurer of the Fayette County Agricultural Improvement Association, said tourism grants received over the past few years have gone toward increased advertisement, capital improvements and educational projects for the annual Fayette County Fair.

“We’ve been able to cover all the advertising angles and make the fairgrounds more usable to entice people to come see us,” Blaney said. “We have to somehow get out-of-towners and out-of-county people to come, because they not only spend money at the fair, but they make a trip out of it.”

Without the tourism grants, Blaney said fair promotions would be limited, as would opportunities to bring in “big-name” entertainment, which often draws the biggest crowds.

“The fact is, bringing in that outside funding keeps us upgraded and allows us to make the place a lot more useful,” Blaney said.

A tourism grant recipient for six years, the State Theatre Center for the Arts in Uniontown uses its funding to help with utility bills and marketing costs.

“We’ve been very fortunate in Fayette County that our commissioners have allowed us to use the grants for operating expenses,” said State Theatre Executive Director Erica Miller. “It really is a major help to us, and we’ve been able to let people in outlying counties and regions know the state theatre is here and available to them.”

Miller said the grants have been “invaluable” and “so extremely important” to the nonprofit theatre.

“It’s given us a great opportunity to shine a light on this beautiful building,” she said. “Without it, we would feel the loss substantially.”

Fayette County Commissioner Vincent A. Vicites said the program has been instrumental in upgrading county-owned facilities, improving bicycling trails and other recreational sites, maximizing county tourism promotion and creating new tourism amenities, such as the Fayette County Visitor Information Center.

“When we implemented this, we wanted to create funding opportunities for tourism-related entities to maximize their self-promotion, and I think we’re doing just that,” Vicites said. “People will stay longer in Fayette County and spend money locally if they see what we have to offer, and that’s what we’re trying to accomplish.”

Commissioner Dave Lohr said the program is a “key element to Fayette County tourism.”



“Fayette is phenomenal for tourism sites, which brings economic growth into the hotels and other businesses,” Lohr said. “The grants through the hotel tax are a vital tool that we need for continued county development. When you start encouraging the tourism side, it’s a good selling point to get major corporations to come into the county.”

Nemanic said the commissioners work very closely with the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau to ensure the tourism grants are distributed in the most impactful way possible, often aiding independent businesses.

“We talk about the overall reaching of the visitors bureau, and the commissioners definitely recognize that reach. Overall, the grants have really helped to enhance the visitors’ experience in the county,” Nemanic said. “Many of these individual proprietors are mom-and-pop shops, so the grants have allowed them to capture marketing dollars, make improvements and secure dollars that are extremely difficult to find.”

Many grant recipients reinvest their funding right back into the county, Nemanic added.

“It’s a win-win, and we are extremely confident that what we can say to our visitors when they arrive in the county is that they will have an experience they will long remember, all because we stepped up our tourism game,” she said.

For more information on the Fayette County Tourism Grants Program, visit www.laurelhighlands.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.info.

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