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Selling tourism for the county

Chris Silcox
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A significant part of Anderson County's financial future rests in a pleasant-looking log cabin located off Hwy. 61 situated amongst a smattering of hotels and gas stations.

That's the building that houses the offices of the Anderson County Tourism Council and its director, Stephanie Wells.

Since taking over as Tourism Council Director in 2001, Wells has helped Anderson County's once-fledgling tourism industry reach unprecedented heights. Others are starting to take notice.

Dist. 8 Anderson County Commissioner Robin Biloski says Wells and the tourism council are among the best-kept secrets in Anderson County.

"Stephanie runs a great department and watches ev-

The secret to promoting Anderson County? The county itself

ery dollar," said Biloski, who noted how impressed she has been with the passion and determination that Wells exhibits in performing her duties as Tourism Council Director. "What she does to promote tourism is so beneficial."

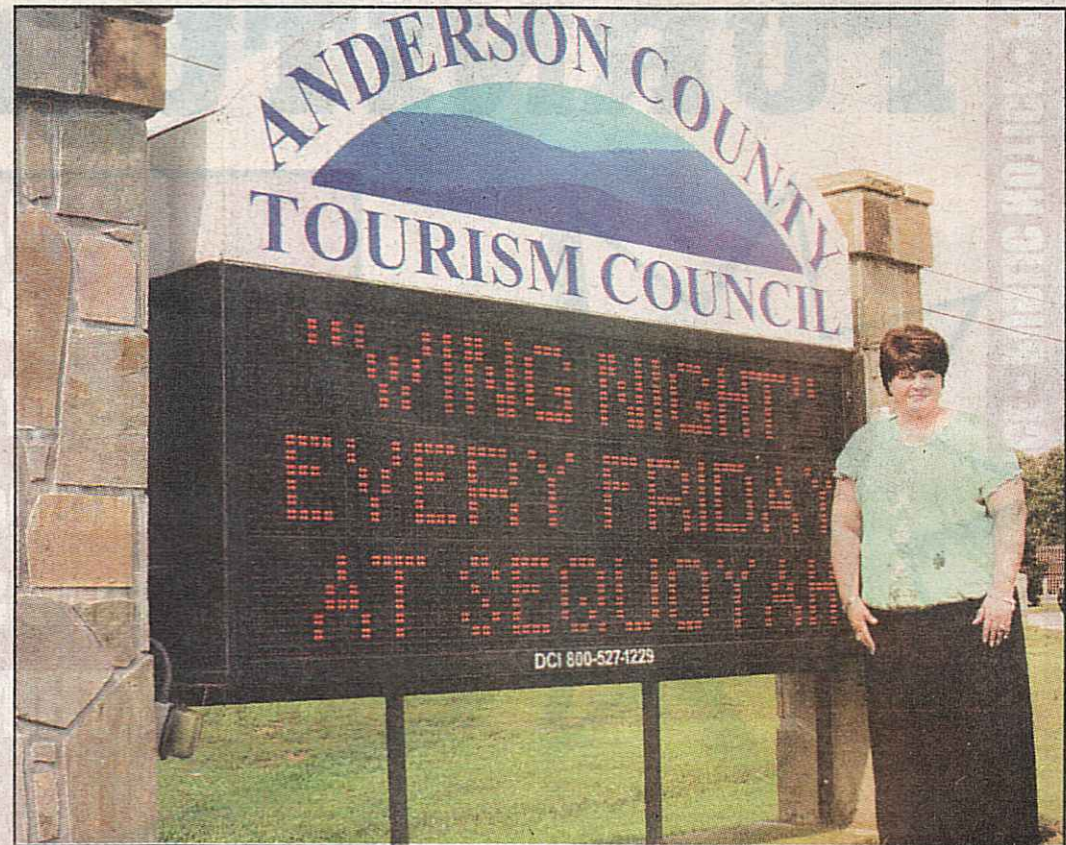
Coal Creek Watershed Foundation President Barry Thacker has worked with Wells on various projects aimed at spotlighting the Lake City/Briceville community's proud coal mining history. Thacker says Wells' understanding of the county and how to sell its virtues to tourists is a unique but unmistakable trait.

"Stephanie understands

the importance of branding in advertising but whether you are selling tourism or widgets turning dreams into reality requires more than just branding," Thacker commented. "It requires that you develop, sell, and implement a plan. That's Stephanie's forte."

An Anderson County native, Wells's first job in county government came as an assistant to former County Mayor Rex Lynch. She has since changed job titles but remains one of the few constants in a frequently transitioning county government.

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Anderson County Tourism Council Director Stephanie Wells says Norris Lake remains one of Anderson County's most significant draws for tourists from out of the area. Wells says new projects such as a proposed Lake City coal miners' museum as well as various geotourism opportunities could lead to further success for the local tourism industry. — Chris Silcox

Tourism

from 1A

Wells remains confident that this county's best days are ahead of it. The tourism industry, she declares, can be the doorway to those better days and a fountain of unrealized financial successes for the county.

"I know it's my job to promote tourism but it's very encouraging when others begin to realize that this county has so much to offer," she said.

Gaining steam after a trying beginning

Wells, a 1999 University of Tennessee graduate with a degree in Public Relations, began working with the county's Tourism Council in 2001.

She has since immersed herself in all things Anderson County on a quest to find this area's tourism niche, the one attribute of Anderson County that would draw people from other areas to visit here and then go back home and tell their friends about it.

During her early days as Tourism Council Director her chief motivation was merely keeping the department operational.

"When I started here it was right after 9-11," she said. "Everybody said, 'Oh, you're making a mistake going into tourism right after 9-11. But we have seen growth every year. During my first year our (annual) budget was \$90,000 and now it has grown to over \$250,000. Our advertising budget was \$5,000, and this year it's \$100,000.'"

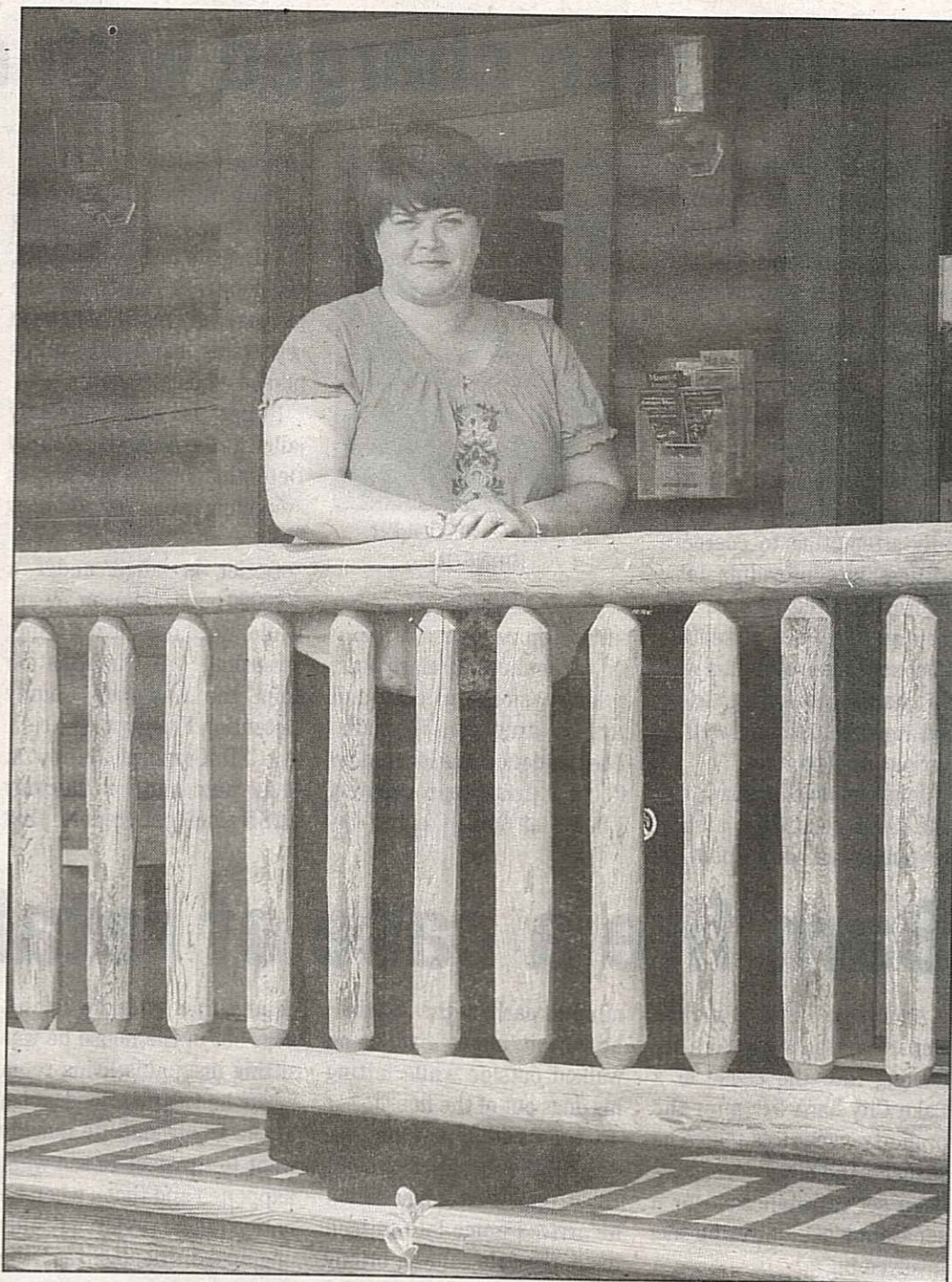
Wells was among the key players in a successful recent effort to convince the county's legislative body to purchase a building in Lake City to house the long-anticipated coal miners museum.

"The museum is such a big deal," said Wells. "Not only is it a great way to pay tribute to the area's unique history and some of the remarkable events that occurred there, but the museum could be a huge benefit by helping revitalize the downtown area and bring revenue into that community."

Having worked closely with different aspects of county government, Wells is aware of the financial boon a healthy tourism industry can have on the local economy.

"The thing about tourism is it adds to the economy without taking away from it," she explained. "It brings in sales tax and it brings in businesses that cater to tourism that wouldn't be here otherwise. Those businesses generate property tax and business tax...and they bring people from other areas here to visit and spend money, so tourism revenue is kind of like the icing on the cake."

Wells has witnessed - and contributed to - the county's most recent tourism revival as four new hotels have opened near the Interstate-75 Clinton/Norris exit since 2003. The tourism resurgence of last decade continues to generate hundreds of thousands of dollars into the local economy as travelers consistently fill hotels and spend money at area restaurants



Anderson County Tourism Council Director Stephanie Wells has helped the county's tourism industry realize unprecedented successes over the last decade. Wells says new projects such as a proposed Lake City coal miners' museum as well as various geotourism opportunities could lead to further success for the local tourism industry. — Chris Silcox

and gas stations.

That profitable aspect of tourism, however, is primarily attributed to the county's enviable location with multiple exits off highly traveled I-75 and near a popular vacation destination like The Great Smokey Mountains. Wells points out that local hotels also see a noticeable spike in business on weekends of home University of Tennessee football games during college football season, which begins this weekend.

"We definitely see more business at our hotels on weekends of home UT football games," said Wells. "That's another factor of our great location. Our proximity (to Knoxville and The Great Smoky Mountains) really helps us."

Enduring ebbs and flows of tourism

Much of the Tourism Council's existence is tied to Interstate motorists who either plan in advance or decide at the last minute to spend the night at an Anderson County hotel.

"We're funded by hotel/motel tax," Wells explained. "So the county collects the hotel/motel tax and we get 90-percent of it and the Anderson County Chamber of Commerce gets 10-percent."

Relying on motels to fill is by no means an exact science. In fact, it's a concept that depends on everything from season to weather to traffic.

When a traveler leaves the Interstate and spends the night in an Anderson County hotel room that person unwittingly participates in Anderson County's tourism cycle.

"Our whole philosophy is 'heads-in-beds,'" said Wells.

"If we are successful at putting heads in beds then that generates money to fund other things and helps keep growing tourism in Anderson County."

The hotels at the exit boast an impressive occupancy rate through much of the year, Wells noted. "If you look at our occupancy-rate through the whole year: we have a spike in April, we have a spike during the summer months - May, June, July - and it usually starts to go down a little bit in August but spikes again in October and November."

The Interstate will always be among the county's most profitable resources. The Tourism Council might not have even been developed without I-75.

"A lot of our initial growth as a department was because the traffic on Interstate-75 and (after 9-11) people chose to drive instead of fly to destinations," Wells stated.

Depending on weary travelers for tourism dollars can be risky, however.

As Tourism Council Director, Wells has seen first-hand the economic ebbs and flows that naturally exist in the tourism industry.

As the person most in charge of promoting tourism in a county with no roller coasters, no water slides, no casinos, and no dinner theaters, Wells is familiar with the challenges of filling those hotel rooms during winter months amidst an economic downturn felt across the county.

It's those challenges that led county officials and tourism proponents to focus in recent years on discovering the county's niche in the tourism world. They didn't have to look far.

Anderson County's best tourism draw, ways Wells, is

the county itself - its natural resources, its history and its people.

It's that unique history that some local officials are banking on to be a prime revenue generator for the future.

Wells is a fierce advocate of this concept.

"We have a lot of history and heritage in this area and you have a lot of people these days that are trying to reconnect with that," Wells commented. "With Oak Ridge you have people who helped with the Manhattan Project, and sadly that generation is dying. And now those grandkids are wanting to know what their grandparents did, and how did they contribute to World War II. There are a lot of people who visit here for that reason."

The coal miner's museum proposed for Lake City could bring similar "generational-reconnection" tourism draw for the county, said Wells.

"This is actually something that's been in the works since I've been involved in tourism in Anderson County and we've always asked the question: How can we promote the coal mining history of that area?"

Initial response for the proposed coal miner's museum has been overwhelmingly positive.

"We've heard so many people say, 'well, my grandfather or my great-grandfather worked in the mines and we never knew what happened until the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation started promoting some of that history,'" she continued. "The coal mining history in that community is such a unique story...I'm just so proud that we're going to have a museum where we can pay tribute to all those people and that community."

Wells has involved herself in the preservation of the

county's history to such a degree that she can get emotional when retelling the trials and hardships endured by the fallen Coal Creek miners and their families in the early 20th century. She drew a standing ovation from the Anderson County Commission at the Monday, Aug. 19 meeting after detailing what the museum means to that community and how much work they've done to make it a reality.

"It's such a unique and powerful story," she said. "It's something this county should be proud of and this story needs to be preserved for future generations."

Wells pointed out that the Museum of Appalachia, one of the county's oldest and most popular tourist attractions, has been drawing visitors by focusing on heritage for more than two decades now. The Oak Ridge Museum of Science and Energy and the Clinton antique festival have also helped the county reap tourism revenue over the years.

"The Museum of Appalachia and (museum founder) John Rice Irwin have always done such a great job of not just displaying artifacts but also telling the story behind those artifacts," said Wells. "That's so important. The Oak Ridge Museum of Science and Energy does a great job at story telling as well and, of course, all the antique stores in Clinton have been a huge draw and such a great tourist attraction through the years."

Making a push toward Geotourism

Celebrating Anderson County's unique past is not the only tourism draw locally.

Wells explained that one of the hottest new concepts in the tourism industry is the idea of geotourism - a form of tourism that focuses on an area's natural surroundings, emphasizing the preservation of the geographical sense of a location.

With rugged hills, miles of dense woodland, and some of the cleanest, purest lakes in the region, Anderson County is a potential geotourism hotspot.

"There is a real push for geotourism," Wells stated. "We have a project with National Geographic that kind of involves all of East Tennessee and the Tennessee River Valley. It's more of an outdoor, green recreation form of tourism. It's a method of finding ways to preserve our natural resources."

With such ideal natural tourism locales as Norris Lake and Windrock Mountain, Wells says Anderson County is a natural pull for geotourists.

"We have outdoor and recreation enthusiasts come to the area for our lakes and trails and we're seeing a huge increase in that," she said. "It's kind of going away from the theme parks, in a way, and going back to enjoying our natural surroundings. Norris Lake is still what brings people here for those extended stays. Our trails and our mountains bring a lot of people here, too."