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Subject: Officials Break Ground to Rebuild State Welcome Center on I-95

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Officials Break Ground to Rebuild State Welcome Center on I-95

Hardeeville – State Representative William B. “Bill” Herbkersman joined the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism (SCPRT) and other tourism officials from the Lowcountry today to break ground for a new official state welcome center off Interstate 95 northbound near Hardeeville. Plans call for replacing the existing 38-year-old facility at this location with an 8,400-square-foot, more modern building with significant customer service upgrades.

“This is a much needed improvement that reflects the direction of our state and, of course, our region,” said Rep. Herbkersman. “Director Duane Parrish rightly recognizes Jasper’s Welcome Center as the ‘front porch’ to South Carolina, and in the Low Country we also view it as the front door to Jasper and Beaufort counties.

“The ability to attract tourism as well as any other industry is our charge to put our best foot forward in these competitive times,” he added. “We are doing just that with the improvements at the Welcome Center here in Jasper County.”

The \$4 million center is expected to open next fall. It was designed by Charleston-based Liollio Architecture and will be built by Brunson Construction Company of Hampton. It is one of two welcome center “total rebuilds” scheduled in South Carolina for 2016. The other is located on I-77 southbound at Fort Mill.

SCPRT’s Parrish believes the welcome centers must keep up with evolving traveler needs and expectations. “Our centers look the same today as they did 30 or 40 years ago, from the buildings’ interior designs, furnishings and fixtures, to the exterior look and feel,” Parrish said. “While these centers have remained mostly the same, everything else has continued to evolve ... from architectural, interior and ergonomic design to advancements in communication technology and even the very nature of how and why we travel,” he said. “We felt this was something that, with increasing urgency, needed to be addressed in order for these centers to effectively fulfill their core mission and purpose.”

The design for the new center at Hardeeville was inspired by the natural beauty of the Lowcountry, specifically the region’s towering pines, sandy beaches, marshes, and shady oak canopies. The building will feature expansive entranceways, shaded by exposed wood rafters on towering metal columns. The brick of choice for the exterior will be a sandy-beach color.

Among the customer service improvements planned in the new center are:

- Self-serve kiosks with travel information
- A digital guestbook
- Monitors that broadcast real-time weather updates and road conditions
- Tablets that will be used by staff to further assist travelers with access to information
- A more open, customer-friendly lobby
- A Family Care Area for guests who need a comfortable and private place for breastfeeding and other medical needs
- A vending area located inside a lighted night entrance

“Like any front porch, it is important that our centers make each and every visitor feel welcome and glad they chose South Carolina as their travel destination,” Parrish said.

South Carolina's welcome centers are on the major interstates at the state's borders, as well as at Santee on I-95 and on U.S. 17 in Little River. They were built across the state in the late 1960s to early 1980s to serve a growing traveling public. They contribute to the state's \$18 billion tourism economy through travel assistance, hotel reservations, itinerary building and other support.

About 2.3 million visitors use the Hardeeville welcome center every year and the staff's assistance generates an estimated \$510,000 economic impact across the state.

For more information on the new state welcome center on I-95 contact Dawn Dawson-House at ddawson@scprt.com or 803-467-0202.

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Editors and producers: For an artist's rendering of the new center, contact Dawn Dawson-House at 803-467-0202.

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