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Effort to market NENC's African American Experience

By Paul Nielsen Staff Writer

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Elizabeth City State University will likely be highlighted in the “The African American Experience of NENC,” a new, five-county marketing campaign to raise awareness of northeastern North Carolina’s African-American historical sites.

Photo courtesy ECSU

Tourism officials from five area counties will kick off a marketing campaign in June that they hope will raise awareness of northeastern North Carolina’s African-American historical sites.

Camden, Chowan, Currituck, Dare and Pasquotank counties are behind the effort that will begin on June 19, which is when “Juneteenth” is celebrated. Juneteenth, or June 19, is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. It’s believed to be the date in 1865 when news that the Civil War had ended finally reached slaves in Texas.

The campaign is called “The African American Experience of NENC” and the goal is to “inspire exploration and appreciation” for the African American Experience of northeast North Carolina that will drive cultural tourism and provide positive economic impact to the area.

“The African American Experience of Northeast North Carolina celebrates the contributions of African Americans and encourages a deeper understanding of the significance of the region’s cultural heritage in order to build more inclusive communities,” the group’s vision statement reads.

The Brandilly Creative Group, a black-owned agency in Raleigh, has been hired to execute the marketing campaign. The five tourism departments have so far contributed \$34,000 to the effort, with the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank County Tourism Development Authority kicking in \$10,000.

“(Brandilly) has worked with the North Carolina African American Cultural Heritage Commission, so they have a lot of experience in this area,” said Visit Elizabeth City Executive Director Corrina Ruffieux.

The effort will have its own logo and website that will be highlighted in the initial marketing efforts, which is still in the planning stages. Ruffieux said there is plenty of money available to produce an effective campaign the first year.

“Come June, we are really going to push this out,” Ruffieux said. “We are going to lean pretty heavily on all five tourism departments. We all have our own pretty hefty email lists, our own websites, our own social media presence.”

The marketing campaign will also include a focus on black-owned businesses and events in the region. Elizabeth City State University and the Historic Edenton State Historic Site have already been designated as North Carolina African American Heritage Sites by the state commission.

“We are calling it an African American Experience because it is more than a trail,” Ruffieux said. “If it helps describe it, it is kind of a trail where you visit different sites. But we wanted to use the word ‘experience’ because that pulls in not just visiting historical things but current events and black-owned businesses.”

Tourism officials have also enlisted the help of area experts and historians to create and promote the tourism-focused marketing effort.

“We are working universally on how we can share information across the different counties,” Ruffieux said of the collaborative effort.

Ruffieux initially asked the city-county TDA to contribute \$5,000 to the effort. But City Councilor Johnnie Walton, who sits on the TDA board, requested that the figure be upped to \$10,000, which was unanimously agreed to by the board.

Ruffieux expects that the TDA will contribute more money to the marketing effort next year.

“This is going to be an ongoing project,” Ruffieux said. “We also have plans to apply for grants in the future and partner with other entities throughout the state. I think there is a lot of potential for this project.”

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