



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Charlotte, Sarasota tourism records continue to rise

By **BILL JONES** Staff Writer Charlotte Sun

For tourism, it's been a very good year, again. Tourism statistics are in for quarters two and three this year - April 1 through Sept. 30 - and the numbers continue to climb to record, post-recession levels both statewide and locally.

There are big bucks and jobs, involved.

In August, Gov. Rick Scott announced that a record 26.9 million people traveled to Florida between July 1 and Sept. 30, a 5.1 percent increase from the same period in 2015, in spite of a hurricane and Zika virus fears.

He said the state is expected to attract 115 million visitors this year, up from 106 million in 2015, and that the tourism industry accounts for more than one in 10 jobs in the state. In Sarasota, Visit Sarasota County reported that during the three months of its "Shoptember Sarasota" promotion, ending in September, there was a 3.1 percent increase in visitors staying in paid lodging, and a 4.2 percent increase in visitor spending when compared to the same time period last year.

VSC said that hotel occupancy was at 64.2 percent, an increase of 2.6 percent (despite a 2.1 percent increase in hotel room rates to \$151.72).

Customer satisfaction rates grew from 89 percent in 2015 to 95 percent this year.

This was in addition to Sarasota County's Tallahassee- based Downs and St. German Research report in August that in the past year tourists helped generate \$2.8 billion in revenue and create 24,300 jobs in the county, while spending money on accommodations, shopping, dining and entertainment.

The county welcomed almost 2.5 million travelers in fiscal year 2016, a spike from 2.3 million in 2015 and 2 million in 2014. Every tourist, on average, spent \$900, but the international traveler spent \$1,109.

Downs and St. German reported that for every 102 visitors to Sarasota County, one job is created.

The tourism gains in Charlotte County, although somewhat smaller in number based on population of the two counties, are even a little larger, percentage- wise, according to county's tourism director, Lorah Steiner.

According to the Punta Gorda/ Englewood Beach Visitor and Convention Bureau, Tourism Development Tax revenues in Charlotte County of \$3.8 million exceeded fiscal year 2014-2015 by more than 6 percent. This is the most TDT revenue that the county has collected during a fiscal year since the bureau's inception in 1997, the VCB reported. Charlotte County levies a 5 percent tourist development tax on accommodation stays of six months or less, in addition to a 7 percent sales tax.

The six-month, April- September 2016, tourism counts for Charlotte County continue to climb, according to Steiner, year after year, encompassing 65 months in a row, dating back to 2010, when recovery began from the recession of 2007-2008. Although it's bound to level off sooner or later, she says, the leveling, so far, is not in sight.

The Visitor and Convention Bureau statistics reveal that in calendar year 2015, 395,800 people visited Charlotte, an increase of 12.6 percent over 2014; their estimated direct expenditures were \$345,067,400, up 16.6 percent; and the total economic impact was \$526,227,800, also an increase of 16.6 percent.

In the first quarter this year, January through March, across the board increases were generally 3 percent compared with the same period in 2015. In April through September, the so called "off season," the increases were as high as 7.3 percent over the same period in 2015, with 203,900 people visiting, spending \$167,681,200, with a total economic impact of almost \$256 million.

Arriving by air, 37 percent deplaned at Tampa, 29 percent at RSW in Fort Myers, 8.8 percent at PGD in Punta Gorda, 8.6 percent in Orlando/ Sanford, and 6.2 percent in Miami. Departing destinations for Charlotte visitors were up 20 percent in the Southeast, 15 percent in the Midwest, 13 percent in the Northeast, and 25 percent in opportunity markets - markets, collectively, that have not shown up as significant tourism producers in the past. Europe was down 10 percent, and Canada 23 percent, attributed primarily to the decline of the Euro and Canadian currency versus the U.S. dollar.

Steiner said unrest related to Brexit in England might also have been a factor.

She said the continuing "vertical trajectory" of the tourism market locally will depend on several factors, including water quality issues, beach re-nourishment, and continued focus on attracting summer visitors.

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