

# The Bright Future of Tourism in Charlotte County

By Sean Doherty

The Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau hosts an annual luncheon each year to celebrate the value of tourism for Charlotte County and recognize select industry partners who have worked hard to make positive contributions to the local tourism industry. This year's theme for the event, which took place the first week of May during National Tourism Week, was "The Future is Bright". While we were, and still are, navigating our way through the pandemic as an industry and a community, we feel the theme was appropriate as we are optimistic Charlotte County is well positioned to attract a healthy volume of visitors who will continue to support our growing economy and the jobs that come with it.

The bureau is funded through the bed tax, or tourist development tax, which is levied on visitors spending less than six months in a hotel, vacation home rental, RV park, etc. These dollars are then utilized to market the Charlotte Harbor Gulf Island Coast to potential future visitors with the goal of generating expenditures not only for the area hotels and other lodging establishments but for many other hospitality-related businesses such as restaurants, attractions and retail establishments that rely on visitors for their financial well-being.

Although many destinations around the country continue to struggle economically from a tourism standpoint, Charlotte County, along with many of our in-state counterparts, has benefitted through strategic leisure travel marketing as well as a focus on sports tourism business such as youth baseball and softball tournaments. As Charlotte County is primarily an outdoor recreation destination, our marketing messaging highlighting these natural assets has resonated with potential visitors with a pent-up desire to travel to a location where they could feel safe. In addition, staff at our county sports venues worked diligently to enact sensible safety protocols allowing us to welcome back a variety of sporting events to the destination generating significant economic impact while supporting numerous jobs.

To put things in perspective, our most recent TDT collections, which are a primary barometer of visitor expenditures, indicated an increase of 70% this July in comparison to July 2020. Moreover, year to date TDT is up by 37.7% versus 2020. One important thing to consider in addition to this immediate economic windfall is that looking ahead these stark increases represent a large pool of first-time visitors which we now have the opportunity to market to in the near future for repeat visitation.

But how does tourism benefit the average Charlotte County resident? It's not just through direct economic impact and hospitality industry jobs. As mentioned before, tourism marketing efforts are funded solely through tourist development taxes, so this investment is entirely paid for by our visitors. In addition, due to local tax contributions from tourists, each household's tax liability is reduced by an average of over \$700 annually. Lastly, visitor expenditures contribute significantly to the local option 1% sales tax. These collections have contributed to the development of a variety of quality of life, public safety and infrastructure projects over the years, including the Centennial Park recreation center and pool, the new sailing center at Port Charlotte Beach Park, a public safety digital radio system, the widening of Olean Boulevard and expansion of the jail's medical wing, just to name a few.

Looking ahead, we are excited about what's in store. With the impending opening of Sunseeker Resort, the expansion of Allegiant Air routes into Punta Gorda Airport, the continued

development of Babcock Ranch and the Murdock Village areas, among a number of other projects, the sky's the limit and the future of tourism in Charlotte County truly is bright.

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