

Charlotte County Benefits from Efforts of the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau

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The new year is here and the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau (the official tourist bureau for Charlotte County) extends a warm welcome to Charlotte County visitors who are taking advantage of our good nature. A new tourism director, Mrs. Lorah Steiner, has been appointed and the Bureau is looking ahead to new opportunities.

There was a column in this newspaper on Jan. 8, 2011, titled "County Should Stop Spending Money on this Stuff." Several questions were posed and I would like to correct and clarify points raised as they relate to tourism.

Charlotte County levies a five percent tourist development tax on accommodation stays of six months or less in addition to the seven percent sales tax. Under state law, revenue generated by the tourist development tax must be spent on specific endeavors and cannot be allocated to the County's General Fund. As such, 60 percent is spent for tourism promotion. Tourism supports over 6,000 jobs, generates sales tax revenues of nearly \$19 million and produces over \$313 million in total expenditures.

The Bureau's marketing efforts are directed outside the County in order to attract visitors to Charlotte County. The bureau spends \$1.2 million annually on promoting Charlotte County as a vacation, meeting and sporting events destination. This is accomplished through publishing an annual visitor's guide, maintaining a website, print and electronic advertising, attending tradeshow and conferences, and public relations efforts including hosting members of the media, among other methods. In addition to promoting Charlotte County, \$150,000 of this \$1.2 million supports beach renourishment and staff at Stump Pass Beach State Park.

Bureau staff are key marketing tools. The tourism industry is a relationship business and each staff member has nurtured new and existing relationships with meeting planners, travel agents, journalists and sporting event rights holders to bring more business to and raise the visibility of Charlotte County. These relationships have resulted in conferences and sporting events for Charlotte County such as the Association of National Estuary Programs Annual Conference (Nov. 2010), Southeast Outdoor Press Association Annual Conference (Oct. 2009), Snowbird Baseball Classic (2009 – 2011) and media coverage in high-profile publications as the "Atlanta Journal Constitution," "MSNBC.com," "Sail" magazine and "Southern Living" magazine. As of Nov. 2010, the bureau's media efforts for 2010 have generated more than \$3.4 million in media value (the equivalent of advertising).

Speaking of the Snowbird Baseball Classic, last year the collegiate tournament generated an estimated \$3.1 million in direct expenditures. The three-week event attracted more than 3,200 out-of-state participants, spectators and members of the media who stayed an average of a week in area accommodations. These baseball visitors generated an estimated \$188,094 in state sales tax revenue, \$31,349 in local sales tax revenue and \$43,724 in tourist development tax revenue. The new baseball field Charlotte County is building will be enjoyed by Snowbird Baseball along with other tournaments and citizens. Charlotte County believes in providing quality of life amenities that deliver good, clean benefits and this additional baseball field will afford us another opportunity as a sports destination.

The additional 40 percent of the tourist development tax collected is allocated to fund the bond for the recent renovations at the Charlotte Sports Park. This equates to just more than \$840,000 and no ad valorem dollars are currently used to fund the bond.

Our most recent research indicates nearly 300,000 visitors travel to Charlotte County annually which makes tourism one of Charlotte County's strongest revenue producers and provides an imported source of funds for the County's economy. The Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau's efforts keep Charlotte County relevant in the highly competitive tourism industry to ensure the destination does not lose market share, just as Wal-Mart, Coca Cola and Nike continue to market their brand.

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