

A sound investment

Hike bed tax to boost tourism industry

NEWS - OUR TAKE

Thanks to great exposure in magazines and newspapers, Anna Maria Island remains strong as a tourist destination. And businesses on the entire island are profiting, too.

Old Florida's a romantic and easy sell, attractive to people weary of condo and hotel towers and throngs of sun worshippers cluttering many of the state's beaches.

Thanks to recent articles in USA Today, Baltimore Magazine and a four-page spread in the March edition of Southern Living magazine, interest in Anna Maria Island continues to be strong as demonstrated by a surge in e-mails and phone calls. The island's Chamber of Commerce told Bay News 9 that many of the resorts there sold out during Christmas week.

Even more impressive is the fact that January bookings spiked, too, double those of January 2008. The Dec. 12 USA Today piece got a good portion of the credit.

In the Bay News 9 report on Jan. 5, David Teitelbaum, a chamber director and the owner of the Tradewinds, Seaside and Tortuga resorts, also noted that numerous vacations were booked throughout 2009 after that national exposure.

Which brings us to our point:

Tourism officials can encourage but cannot buy that kind of publicity. Aggressive marketing and advertising helps gain the attention of magazines and newspapers, and, of course, having a highly desirable destination makes it all work.

This shows the county's Tourist Development Council's proposal for a one penny increase in Manatee County's tourism tax is worth pursuing. A 5-cent bed tax could bring in an extra \$1.2 million this year if enacted as soon as May 1.

In comparison, Pinellas County has charged 5 cents for the past three years. Sarasota remains at 4 cents.

We don't believe one extra dollar in tax per \$100 spent would be the tipping point in a vacation decision.

While some of Manatee's new revenue would go into a reserve fund and tourist-related capital improvement projects, a good chunk would be earmarked for marketing.

For fiscal year 2009, the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau put \$2.3 million into marketing out of a \$5.4 million budget from the tourist tax.

At a council meeting last week, board member Teitelbaum called the marketing program “a huge success.” Recent bookings certainly prove that.

The 1 percent visitors tax increase — on money spent at hotels, resorts and tourist rental units — could also support pavilion improvements at both Coquina and Manatee public beaches as well as beach renourishment.

Earlier this week, county commissioners pushed ahead with another project, replacing the unstable pier at Manatee Beach — long a favorite spot for fishing and gazing.

The televised dejected response of a tourist-angler to the pier’s closure early last month serves as a reminder that the structure is a valuable beach asset, well worth the investment of \$1.52 million.

The new pier will be 7 feet higher and possibly 100 feet longer, a boon for all. The downside is permitting and construction could take anywhere from eight to 10 months.

The commission certainly recognizes the value our beaches hold as our primary tourist magnet. Approval for that additional penny in the bed tax, which could come later this month, would cement that.

We must maintain our competitive edge via marketing and improvements.