

County benefits from publicity

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MANATEE COUNTY - The power of favorable publicity is giving motels and other tourist-related businesses on Anna Maria Island and the Manatee County half of Longboat Key a shot of financial adrenaline.

Despite the ongoing recession, motel and hotel occupancy rates in Manatee County were only slightly down last month compared with February 2008, a drop from 71.3 percent to 70.3.

But the news was much brighter on the beaches.

Hotels and motels on Anna Maria Island saw the occupancy rate edge up from 65.2 percent to 66.6, according to the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. At Longboat Key resorts within Manatee, the rate rose slightly from 74.5 percent to 75.5.

Those upticks are bucking regional, statewide and national trends of sinking tourism rates.

Tourism officials, who expected a dire season because of the economy, attribute the flow of overnight visitors at Manatee's beaches to recent travel articles in USA Today, Southern Living, the Boston Globe and Baltimore Sun that promoted Anna Maria Island as a tourism destination with affordable lodging, a free trolley and a low-key atmosphere.

Larry White, director of the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, credited the bureau's public relations firm for convincing USA Today and Southern Living to write about the island. "That's not done at random. You have to be aggressive."

White suspects the USA Today article, which appeared first, motivated the Globe and Sun to publish articles as well.

"The publicity is extraordinary," said David Teitelbaum, who owns and manages the Tortuga Inn, Tradewinds Resort and Seaside Inn & Resort in Bradenton Beach. "What's happening is a recognition of Anna Maria Island as a destination offering value for the money."

The national exposure has translated into 63,387 visits to the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce's Web site within the past month, 76 percent of which were first-time views. That is a jump to nearly 3,000 clicks a day compared with about 600 a few months ago.

The spike in Web hits may be an indication that more vacationers are considering the island as an option.

The number of walk-in customers at the Chamber's office has jumped from about 1,500 to about 2,600 a month.

The occupancy rate at beach resorts also means more dollars flowing into restaurants, souvenir shops and related businesses.

"It translates into \$3 for every \$1 spent on lodging," said Teitelbaum, a member of the county's Tourist Development Council.

"Everybody seems to be booming here," said Mary Ann Brockman, president of the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce.

"If you can't get the heads in the beds, then they don't eat at the restaurants or shop in the stores. ... We're thankful for what we have and we're praying for more."

Teitelbaum said cold weather kept tourists away from the beaches in early February but that the warmer latter half of the month lured them in droves.

He expects March's numbers to be favorable as well.

Manatee's Tourist Development Council, however, still wants the County Commission to consider increasing its room tax on resorts from 4 cents on the dollar to 5 cents. The taxes go toward promotions by the tourism bureau, beach renourishment and other tourism-related projects.

The extra income will keep the promotions budget healthy even if occupancy rates decline as summer approaches and the glow from the widely-circulated magazine and newspaper articles fades, Teitelbaum said.

The \$2 million that the tourism bureau has spent on promotions each year has typically resulted in about \$5 million a year in tourism taxes.

The County Commission will consider the tax increase on April 7.