

Cape May County no longer just a beach vacation

Tourism Department has spent years building up its offseason trade

By KRISTEN KELLEHER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE — Diane Wieland, director of the Cape May County Department of Tourism, said when she started working for the county in 1975, tourism promoted the beach vacation and nothing else.

More than 40 years later, the county is leveraging its assets and letting vacationers know what the area offers in the spring, fall and winter.

Based on Wieland's presentation last week, visitors seem to be interested in much more than lounging on the beach.

On Wednesday, May 3, Wieland presented 2016 tourism spending figures at the 2017 Cape May County Tourism Conference and discussed the county's marketing strategies.

In 2016, \$6.27 billion in tourism spending was generated in Cape May County, second only to Atlantic County, according to Wieland.

The county ranks first in the state in food and beverage, retail and recreation expenditures.

Lodging increased by more than 5 percent and rental income was up 4 percent in 2016.

Second home rental income in the county totals \$2 billion.

Tourism employment grew 1.3 percent over 2015, for a total of 26,151 jobs in Cape May County, which is 43.6 percent of the county's total employment.

More than 12.8 million people came to Cape May County in 2016, and 49 percent of county visitors stay for one week or longer.

Eighty-eight percent of the county's visitors are return visitors. Forty percent

of visitors have been coming for 20 years or more, and 30 percent of the visitors spend \$2,500 or more on vacation.

Garden State Parkway toll plaza counts in July 2015 were 921,725 at the Great Egg toll plaza — just before the bridge between Atlantic and Cape May counties — and 833,232 at the Cape May toll plaza, which is just north of Sea Isle City. In July 2016, toll counts were 941,661 in Great Egg, and 817,652 at Cape May.

Year over year, 6,293 more cars came through the Cape May toll plaza from September to December in 2016 than in 2015.

The county has been working for years on this type of fall growth.

For the last two fall seasons, the county has led a dedicated fall vacation marketing campaign, as a result of grants and an increased budget.

According to Wieland, 49 percent came to the county in the fall, versus 40 percent in 2015, and an extra \$206,000 in occupancy taxes was collected in fall 2016 versus fall 2015.

Web traffic to fallforthejerseycape.com, the website for the county's fall marketing campaign, was up 18 percent over 2015.

In September 2014, the county collected \$964,619 in occupancy tax, and in September 2016, it collected \$1.16 million in occupancy tax.

The fall season has expanded gradually as the county redefined its brand from solely a summer resort, due in part to a rise in ecotourism and agritourism.

Fall and spring birding migration, part of the county's ecotourism, are helping expand the county's shoulder seasons.

Wieland said people from more than 155 countries

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—Diane Wieland, director, Cape May County Tourism

logged onto the Cape May Bird Observatory website last year.

Birders, according to Wieland, will come "anytime and cross any obstacle they can to find that bird to add to their life list."

"We're one of two destinations in the world — Egypt and Cape May County — that has a tourism infrastructure connected to top birding," she said.

Those who travel internationally for the migration will likely stay between three and four weeks, according to Wieland.

The average overnight visitor to the county spends \$374.

Culture and heritage tourism, wineries, and breweries, are also popular with visitors, in addition to ecotourism and agritourism.

"We look at the fall because that's the greatest opportunity for growth," Wieland said. "Businesses are already open. The weather seems to be perfect for visitors, and now we're seeing the aging of baby boomers who are not tied to a school calendar."

According to a county visitor profile, based on a sur-

vey of those who contacted the county Department of Tourism for vacation information, 36 percent of the county's visitor base is between the ages of 55 and 64, 24 percent is 65-plus, and 20 percent are between the ages of 45 and 55.

Twenty percent of visitors are between the ages of 18 and 44.

Of these visitors, 37 percent came as a family, 26 percent came with their spouse or as part of a couple, and 21 percent came with extended family.

Most, 89 percent, came in the summer, 49 percent came in the fall, 37 percent came in the spring, and 15 percent came in the winter.

To attract vacationers this year, the tourism department is using a highly targeted advertising campaign digitally which will target big events regionally. It will also target vacationers who are here regarding local attractions.

Video content will be used as part of the campaign.

"We can target visitors who might be on the boardwalk and say, while you're here don't forget to go to a restaurant or a winery,"

Wieland said.

More than 200 million people access Facebook monthly, more than 90 percent of Americans have a cell phone, and 63 percent use a cell phone to go online, according to Wieland's presentation.

The county's digital campaign appears to be successful.

During the fall 2016 campaign, the click through rate was between 24 and 26 percent, whereas the average is five percent.

A click through rate is the percentage of people who visit a website through a link in an advertisement. New visitors to the website increased by 87 percent and Facebook followers increased by 3.1 percent during the fall campaign.

Cape May County is also a part of the Southern

— State tourism bureau hopes to draw 1 billion visitors.
— Agritourism continues to grow
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Shore Region Destination Marketing Organization (SSRDMO), with Cumberland County, and recently, Atlantic County.

The SSRDMO has been supported by the state Division of Travel and Tourism with grant funds since 2006. To date, it has received \$2.12 million in marketing funds.

In 2016, the SSRDMO generated 32 percent of the state's total tourism expenditures, or \$13.4 billion.

Outdoor seats

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items in the ordinance were not in the original outdoor seating ordinance.

"I think what we've done here is improved it, made it equal and provided people with an opportunity to step up and to be part of the solution for the parking," she said.

Rauch questioned what the city would do with restaurants that have had violations of their seating allotment from their site plan for years.

Charity Clark, a real estate broker and member of the Board of Directors of the Cape May Chamber of Commerce, said the city does not have a plan to ease the lack of parking so collecting \$110,000 per year seemed too high. She said unity among the business and residential communities was important for the success of the town.

The ordinance requires establishments with outdoor seats to submit an outdoor seating plan to the city engineer, city solicitor and other city professionals.

The ordinance also requires a certain distance between seats, pedestrian passage and adherence to the city's noise regulations. The required seating plan portion of the ordinance will be implemented 20 days following approval of

the ordinance by council.

Applicants will pay a one-time application fee of \$250 and place \$500 in escrow until reviews and inspections of outdoor seats are completed. An annual fee of \$10 will be levied.

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**2D Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 PG-13
11:30, 2:40, 6:30, 9:25
**2D Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 PG-13
12:30, 7:00, 9:50
**3D Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 PG-13 3:40
Beauty and the Beast PG 11:50, 3:20, 7:10, 9:55
Fate of the Furious PG-13 12:20, 3:30, 6:50, 9:45
Boss Baby PG 11:10, 1:50, 4:10, 6:40, 9:00
**Alien: Covenant (Thursday Premiere) R
[7:00, 9:40]
Going In Style PG-13 11:20, 2:20, 4:30, 7:40, 9:50
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