

Leaders take local issues to capital

Tourism, I-73, hotel pools are the top priorities

September 25, 2008

By Lisa Fleisher
The Sun News
Myrtle Beach, SC

Grand Strand business leaders and national tourism lobbyists are in Washington, D.C., this week, hoping that lawmakers - buried in the mucky debate of bailout legislation - are able to pull their heads up for a moment to listen to less acute economic concerns.

So far, Myrtle Beach officials say they have appointments with all members of the S.C. delegation - not just their staffs - so they are hopeful their message will be heard.

There are three top issues on the agenda for Myrtle Beach officials:

They want help changing federal insurance rules that could prevent hoteliers from creating temporary indoor pools in the off-season;

They want a plan to fund Interstate 73, which would connect Myrtle Beach to Michigan;

And they want support for a bill aimed at bringing more foreign tourists - and their foreign currency - to the United States.

Grand Strand leaders and representatives from the N.C. tourism industry are in D.C. this week to show support for the bill, called the Travel Promotion Act.

The Travel Industry Association, a national tourism trade group, has been lobbying Congress to pass the bill. It would create a nonprofit corporation that would help advertise the U.S. to overseas tourists and begin other initiatives to make going through customs a smoother process.

"Increasing international travel to the United States is one of the best stimulants to our struggling economy," Roger Dow, president and chief executive of TIA, said in a statement. "It is time for Congress to pass this common sense legislation."

The association said that since Sept. 11, 2001, foreign tourism has declined, costing the country 46 million tourists and \$140 billion in spending.

The project would be funded partially by the private sector and partially through a \$10 fee charged to some international visitors. Industry leaders say this is a small price for someone taking an international trip.

In the past, Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., has criticized the bill as having the potential to create too much bureaucracy for something the private sector should do itself. A spokesman could not be reached Wednesday for comment.

A spokesman for Sen. Lindsey Graham also couldn't be reached. All of the state's representatives are on the bill as co-sponsors.

Grand Strand leaders will also be talking about an issue that has created an impasse between the city government and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The agency says hotels should stop their annual practice of putting up temporary walls to create indoor pools for winter guests. The agency says the walls could become dangerous projectiles and damage building foundations.

City officials, who have been in talks with FEMA officials, say the structures are no different than those FEMA allows for parking and storage spaces.

"This is a major issue that will have a detrimental impact on the tourism economy and, potentially, real estate values," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "At this point, we're at a bureaucratic impasse."

Dean said he knows the congressional representatives are busy this week, but he hopes they can still get their issues across.

"We're pretty respectful of their time," he said.

Still, it's important to remind leaders of local priorities, such as Interstate 73, he said. Funding for that road could come up in a bill next year.

Contact LISA FLEISHER at 626-0317.