

Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC)
September 28, 2006
Section: NEBSOU
Page: 7

PROSSER SUMS UP TOURISM Lloyd Mackall For The Sun News

Now recognized as a driving force in the S.C. economy, the tourism industry is working to encourage more spending by each visitor, according to Chad Prosser, director of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism who spoke to the Murrells Inlet Rotary Club on Aug. 29 at Dockside Restaurant.

He said tourism, the state's largest export, is a tough industry to define. "There is a lot we're beginning to understand," said Prosser, who said 30 million tourists visit the Palmetto State.

Prosser said tourism brings amazing returns, considering the lower level of capital investment compared with other industries. "When BMW originally announced a facility here, it was projected the \$300 million investment would bring 1,200 jobs," he said. "The recent Hard Rock investment is \$400 million with 3,000 jobs projected." That's a major boost, Prosser said.

"Cal Ripken, president of the Ripken Experience, is expecting to bring people in from 17 states we currently do not attract, such as Arizona and California," said Prosser, adding that more than a dozen planning and development people have come to study Ripken's baseball programs.

"Contrary to popular belief, there is not a negative perception problem with Myrtle Beach," Prosser said.

"It is an awareness problem, and this is something we can solve with money."

In less than five years, the Grand Strand's number of guest rooms has increased by 25 percent, from 75,000 to 91,000, and the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce is working toward filling them. Overall growth is expected to rise from the current 14 million yearly visitors to 20 million, Prosser said.

"We're competing globally to be among the top worldwide tourist economies to reach people - competing with Mexico, Canada, Florida, Africa, Spain and Frankfurt," he said. "People are mobile today and security has become an issue."

"The goal is to double per-tourist spending in the next five years, so the total level is at
\$30 billion by 2030," Prosser said. "That's why Access I-73 and the airport expansion

program are so important. We're having Ron Allen, retired president of Delta Air, to review our air travel. Those people who fly in spend more per person."

Prosser said tourist service jobs are fairly easy to create, but attrition is a big factor. Understanding the needs of ``mom and pop" businesses, which are common in the tourist sector, is another challenge.

``Our New Carolina Initiative is bringing the tourism industry together, as volunteers from within the tourism industry ranks are sharing their time and talent," Prosser said.

Travel and tourism need more people from the private side of business to help, such as food suppliers. Many such allied industries are benefiting by the expansion of Myrtle Beach, according to Prosser, who lives in Murrells Inlet.

``Our state parks are working to improve," said Prosser, who oversees cultural, historic and natural treasures, including 46 state parks, the Statehouse and governor's mansion.

Contact LLOYD MACKALL at 651-4610 or lmackall@sc.rr.com