



Visit Florida: St. Johns County ahead in the tourism game

By Colleen Jones
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The Fountain of Youth was a stopover on Visit Florida's schedule of community tourism meetings the organization regularly holds across the state.

On Thursday, Dana Young, president and CEO of the state's official marketing tourism agency, presented a broad snapshot of the state of tourism in Florida to local business and community leaders.

The good news: St. Augustine and St. Johns County as a whole is one of the best performing markets in the state.

The not-as-good news: With the funding Visit Florida receives to promote visitation to the area and the rest of the Sunshine State cut over last year's budget, those in the local tourism industry hope it stays that way.

Tourism to Florida in 2018 reached "unprecedented levels," Young said, with 127 million visitors to the state, and in the second quarter of this year, 69.7 million visitors had already been counted.

Young also presented an overview of current data collected on Northeast Florida (which includes the other six counties surrounding St. Johns). Tourism supported 61,000 jobs to the local economy. There was a 31% rate increase in hotel rooms and a 41% increase in bed taxes collected since 2014.

Richard Goldman, president and CEO of the county visitors and convention bureau, underscored Young's assessment of the health of the hospitality business.

"The outlook for tourism in St. Augustine is good. We're tracking up about 7%," Goldman said.

Young pointed to her agency's marketing of specific points of interest in the area, including a promotional video featured on the Visit Florida website that showcases Ripple Effect EcoTours near Marineland.

"That's something that's resonated with the public very strongly," Young said.

It's those kinds of efforts that can draw more people to the First Coast and that local businesses fear could be jeopardized by the deficit Visit Florida began working under as of July 1.

In 2018, Visit Florida had a budget of \$76 million. This year, the state Legislature cut that pool to \$50 million with no guarantee that it would reauthorize any appropriations in the next budget cycle.

While neither the VCB nor the county's Tourist Development Council receives money directly from Visit Florida, they do get the benefit of low- or no-cost marketing services such as cooperative advertising programs, trade shows, press publicity and a social media presence — all of which extend the reach of St. Johns County's overall promotional efforts to national and international audiences.

Young said going forward Visit Florida would focus its efforts in areas such as international tourism that tend to provide more bang for the buck.

Visitors from abroad tend to spend more time in Florida and spend more money than domestic visitors, for example, Young said.

Goldman said that international tourism in this area had doubled from about 2% to 4% over the last year, which is still not a huge percentage of overall visitation.

Unfortunately, Goldman said, that with the exchange rate of foreign currencies trending downward, he expected that to have some impact.

Young said she and other destination marketing organizations would continue to lobby in Tallahassee to communicate the value of the tourism economy to Florida.

"Once you start putting the numbers to the results, it hard to argue it," Young said.