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Subject: January 2016 News & Economic Indicators of Tourism in South Carolina

In This Issue

January 29, 2016

STAR Grant's Spring Round Opens
in Early Feb.

Breakout Sessions at Gov Conf
Explore Trends / Best Practices

Ground Broken for New
Welcome Center on I-95

National Parks / State Parks Form
Partnership

Rising Above Challenges

Duane Parrish Director

I'm looking forward to seeing you at the [Governor's Conference](#) on Tourism and Travel in the next few weeks, and defining our success this past year in spite of the enormous challenges we faced. I'll also unveil plans for 2016 and discuss how you can get involved.

In an SCPRT update session at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 17, I will announce the latest economic impact figures for South Carolina's tourism industry, revealing how we grow the economy, generate jobs, save taxpayers and contribute to the overall quality of life in South Carolina.

I will unveil SCPRT's bold, new marketing campaign for 2016, and demonstrate

Statewide Hotel RevPAR -- Increases in occupancy and in average room rates led to an 11.9% increase in RevPAR for November 2015. Year-to-date RevPAR is 6.9% greater than the year before.

Admissions Tax -- While collections for the month of November 2015 are slightly ahead of the previous year, the year-to-date remains lower than 2014.

how we listen to consumers, respond to their changing expectations, and serve up irresistible reasons for them to choose South Carolina for their next vacations.

I will also provide an update on the welcome center re-building project, outlining our plans to transform them into centers of hospitality, bring them into the 21st century, and help them serve as South Carolina's front porches.

I will define the new grant programs we've created at SCPRT to help our destinations reach their tourism potential, and give an update on parks, our true treasured resources and hidden gems.

The conference will be held Feb. 15-17 at [Belmond Charleston Place](#) in Charleston. You won't want to miss it. Remember to register by January 30 for the early bird discount and make plans to meet us in Charleston!

State Park Revenue -- While hotels in the Midlands increased occupancy in November as a result of cleanup from the flooding, state parks suffered from both damage to some parks as well as cancellations from the October floods.

Airport Deplanements

Most airports in South Carolina are reporting increases in deplanements for the month of November 2015, with Columbia Metropolitan Airport leading at 18.9%. Deplanements year-to-date in South Carolina are up 5.7%.

Occupancy Forecast

STR, Inc. forecasts a dip in occupancy in February followed by relatively steady business in March and April.

SCPRT Accepting Event Hosting Applications for STAR Grant Program in Early February

The 2016 spring round for Event Hosting Applications under the Sports Tourism Advertising and Recruitment (STAR) Grant program will open Monday, Feb. 8. Applications will be available at this [link](#) in early February.

The grant program is designed to assist communities and eligible non-profit organizations, who apply through their city or county governments, in attracting and hosting large, new-to-the-state sporting events that will bring participants and visitors to South Carolina. It will provide a 1:1 match up to \$50,000 to approved applicants for eligible expenses associated with Event Bidding and Event Hosting. An approved application for Event Hosting could receive funding to help cover the costs of certain site and advertising expenses associated with hosting.

While Event Bidding applications are accepted year round, Event Hosting applications are accepted only in the spring and fall. All Event Hosting applications for the upcoming 2016 spring round are due by 4:30 p.m. on Monday, March 7.

For complete guidelines, visit the grant webpage [here](#).

Breakout Sessions Discuss Marketing Trends and Best Practices

The breakout sessions at the upcoming Governor's Conference on Tourism and Travel will delve deeper into the practice of marketing and promotion, featuring experts who will discuss new trends, best practices and great

ideas for DMOs, sports marketing and nature-based tourism. Breakout sessions will be held from 10:45-11:45 a.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 16.

Paul Ouimet, Executive Vice President of InterVISTAS Consulting, Inc., will discuss the latest, bold initiative from Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) in helping DMOs find success in a dramatically changing consumer landscape. The DestinationNEXT initiative is a toolkit that covers significant trends facing DMOs, provides assessment tools and suggests best practices that lead to marketing success.

Paul Ouimet

Don Schumacher, Executive Director of the National Association of Sports Commissions, will discuss trends, challenges and opportunities for destinations when recruiting and hosting major sports events.

And a panel of nature-based tourism representatives will discuss new ways to forge paths in promoting the great outdoors to the right consumers.

The Governor's Conference will be held Feb. 15-17 at the Belmond Charleston Place Hotel in Charleston. For more information, visit www.SCGovCon.com.

Don Schumacher

SCPRT to Rebuild Welcome Center on I-95

Plans call for center to be open by fall 2016

State Representatives William B. "Bill" Herbkersman and William K. "Bill" Bowers joined the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism (SCPRT) and other tourism officials from the Lowcountry to break ground for a new official state welcome center off Interstate 95 northbound near Hardeeville. Plans call for replacing the existing 38-year-old facility at this location with an 8,400-square-foot, more modern building with significant customer service upgrades.

"This is a much needed improvement that reflects the direction of our state and, of course, our region," said Rep. Herbkersman. "Director Duane Parrish rightly recognizes Jasper's Welcome Center as the 'front porch' to South Carolina, and, in the Low Country, we also view it as the front door to Jasper and Beaufort counties.

"The ability to attract tourism as well as any other industry is our charge to put our best foot forward in these competitive times," he added. "We are doing just that with the improvements at the Welcome Center here in Jasper County."

Left to right - Gwen Hendley, manager of the I-95 welcome center in Hardeeville; Duane Parrish, Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism; Bill Miles, President and CEO of the Hilton Head Island / Bluffton Chamber of Commerce & CVB; Peach Morrison, Director of the Lowcountry and Resort Islands Tourism Commission; State Representative William B. "Bill" Herbkersman; State Representative William K. "Bill" Bowers; Jennifer Charzewski, Associate Principal, Liollo Architecture, and Greg Brunson, Vice President of Brunson Construction Company.

The new \$4 million center is expected to open in the fall. It was designed by Charleston-based Liollo Architecture and will be built by Brunson Construction Company of Hampton. It is one of two welcome center "total rebuilds" scheduled in South Carolina for 2016. The other is located on I-77 southbound at Fort Mill.

SCPRT Director Duane Parrish calls the welcome centers South Carolina's front porches that need a little upgrading. "Our centers look the same today as they did 30 or 40 years ago, from the buildings' interior designs, furnishings and fixtures, to the exterior look and feel," Parrish said. "While these centers have remained mostly the same, everything else has continued to evolve ... from architectural, interior and ergonomic design to advancements in communication technology and even the very nature of how and why we travel," he said. "We felt this was something that, with increasing urgency, needed to be addressed in order for these centers to effectively fulfill their core mission and purpose."

The design for the new center at Hardeeville was inspired by the natural beauty of the Lowcountry, specifically the region's towering pines, shady oak canopies, sandy beaches and marshes. The building will feature expansive entranceways, shaded by exposed wood rafters on towering metal columns. The brick of choice for the exterior will be a sandy-beach color.

Among the customer service improvements planned in the new center are:

- Self-serve kiosks with travel information
- A digital guestbook
- Monitors that broadcast real-time weather updates and road conditions
- Tablets that will be used by staff to further assist travelers with access to information
- A more open, customer-friendly lobby
- A Family Care Area for guests who need a comfortable and private place for breastfeeding and other medical needs
- A vending area located inside a lighted night entrance

"Like any front porch, it is important that our centers make each and every visitor feel welcome and glad they chose South Carolina as their travel destination," Parrish said.

About 2.3 million visitors use the Hardeeville welcome center every year and the staff's assistance generates an estimated \$510,000 economic impact across the state.

National Parks and SC State Parks Collaborate

The National Park Service and South Carolina's State Park Service entered into a collaborative agreement and will share resources and visitor services to celebrate NPS' 100th anniversary. The partnership strengthens connections between the resource management, interpretive services and educational programming at both agencies, and provides a more "Seamless System of Parks" for visitors to enjoy.

Sealed with a handshake -- The partnership agreement was signed this month by Phil Gaines (left), Director of South Carolina State Park Service, and Barclay Trimble, NPS' Deputy Regional Director for the Southeast

"As we celebrate the National Park Service's 100th Birthday this year, Americans everywhere are encouraged to 'Find Your Park' in any public space," said Barclay Trimble, National Park Service Deputy Regional Director, Southeast. "This new partnership between the National Park Service and South Carolina State Park Service demonstrates solidarity in our shared mission of providing safe recreation and preservation of our critical resources."

"Our goal has always been to preserve, protect and interpret South Carolina's natural and cultural treasures for today and future generations," said Phil Gaines, Director of the State Park Service. "A partnership with the national park service means we'll have more resources to do just that."

One of the joint projects would add all eight NPS sites in South Carolina to the state park service's [Ultimate Outsider](#) program, a promotion that offers

prizes to people who visit all state parks. Those who visit all state and national parks in South Carolina will win a T-shirt and a park passport that allows free admission to state parks for one year.

Another joint project will be a Bird Bio-Blitz that NPS is hosting to celebrate its Centennial. Parks across the nation, including national and state parks in South Carolina, will be hosting bird walks, demonstrations, bird counts and other activities to learn more about the bio-diversity of natural communities.

A variety of other activities, ranging from joint training exercises between the two agencies to joint family campouts, are also being planned under the new partnership.

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