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Date: 12/29/2015 10:02:36 AM
Subject: FW: December 2015 News & Economic Indicators of Tourism in South Carolina

From: South Carolina Tourism Today
Sent: Tuesday, December 29, 2015 10:02:09 AM (UTC-05:00) Eastern Time (US & Canada)
To: Agency Info,
Subject: December 2015 News & Economic Indicators of Tourism in South Carolina

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As the year ends and we think about the defining moments of 2015, perhaps the greatest story that emerges is South Carolina's triumph over tragedies. From the horror at Mother Emanuel in the spring to the flooding across South Carolina in the fall, the incidents challenged our resolve, shook our foundation and forced us to pause.

What they did not do was break South Carolina.

Instead we discovered new layers of strength that led to grace, unity, bold leadership and healing. We discovered new levels of compassion that led to more community support, volunteerism and recovery.

We also did not lose sight of the good things about South Carolina, its beauty and exceptional story, its hospitality and generous spirit. And we have done a yeoman's job reminding the world that South Carolina remains a great place to experience.

We can take the lessons learned from 2015 and forge even greater paths in 2016. I'm looking forward to it, and hope you are, too!

Governor's Conference App Available

Be sure to download the official 2016 Governor's Conference App, where you can keep up with conference events, schedules and news, and communicate with fellow attendees from any mobile device! Details for downloading and logging in will be included in your conference registration confirmation.

Deadline for Award Nominations is Jan. 15

The deadline for submitting nominations for [Tourism Industry Awards](#) is 5 p.m. Friday, Jan. 15! The industry will recognize outstanding accomplishments in tourism by presenting the Governor's Cup, the Bundy Award and the Hospitality Employee of the Year Award at the luncheon on Wednesday, Feb. 17.

Statewide Hotel RevPAR -- RevPAR for the month of October 2015 is up 2.9% compared to October 2014. Year-to-date RevPAR is up 6.6%.

Admissions Tax -- Admissions Tax collections for October 2015 are significantly lower when compared to October 2014. Multiple factors, including a lower number of businesses reporting in October to businesses closed from flooding, might be at play. Admissions Tax collections year-to-date are down 7%.

State Parks Revenue -- October flooding significantly impacted state park visitation and use, especially for camping. Revenue for the month of October is about 20% less than last year. Year-to-date, state park revenue is down 1.6%.

Airport Deplanements

Most major airports in South Carolina are reporting increases in deplanements for the month of October 2015. Greenville-Spartanburg leads with a 9.0% increase. Year-to-date deplanements in South Carolina are up 5.2%.

Occupancy Forecast

Construction of new hotels likely contributes to an anticipated dip in the occupancy forecast for the winter months. STR, Inc. forecasts the largest drop in January 2016.

Tourism Investments

Rock Hill and a private developer will invest about \$2.55 million on a new criterium bicycle track and infield parking at the city's Riverwalk development, where a velodrome and a BMX Supercross course already have made the city a cycling hub. The funds will cover the cost of building the track itself -- a 1.5-mile, 20-foot-wide course -- as well as infield parking suitable for cars and RVs, large enough to hold 150 vehicles on race day.

The project is part of an \$8.1 million parks, recreation and tourism improvements package approved by city council in December that largely upgrades facilities, including 30-year-old Cherry Park. City leaders estimate sports tourism has had a \$121.9 million direct economic impact on Rock Hill since 2006. Planned upgrades to Cherry Park as well as Hargett Park will allow these facilities to annually host more than 35 sports tourism events, attracting an estimated 55,000 people and leaving a \$6 million economic impact on the city.

The criterium course is one of three major tourism investments announced in December. The others are a \$20 million water park off Farrow and Hard Scrabble Roads in northeast Richland County, expected to open in the summer of 2017; and a new Hyatt Place Hotel in downtown Sumter, estimated at \$11 million.

The industry's monthly e-newsletter "*South Carolina Tourism Today*" will profile general session speakers and other key topics each month leading up to the [2016 Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel](#). Scheduled for Feb. 15-17 at [Belmond Charleston Place](#) in Charleston, the conference is the industry's largest annual gathering, and covers consumer trends and best marketing practices to help grow tourism in South Carolina.

General Session Speaker: Sid Evans

Editor-in-Chief, *Southern Living*

Group Editor, *Cooking Light*, *Coastal Living*

Sid Evans

Join *Southern Living* Editor-in-Chief Sid Evans for a journey through the magazine's 50-year history, including a look at the evolution of Southern culture, of travel and travel trends, and how *Southern Living* has adapted over the past five decades and continues to positively influence both public awareness and public opinion of the South. Evans' session will be held from 9

to 10:15 a.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 16, at the SC Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel.

Evans was named editor-in-chief of Time Inc.'s *Southern Living* in April 2014 and has editorial oversight of *Cooking Light* and *Coastal Living*, as group editor, a role he has held since July 2011.

He has set standards of excellence for every brand he's touched throughout his career, and is responsible for the editorial vision, direction, and content for the iconic *Southern Living* multimedia brand. Reaching more than 16 million people each month, *Southern Living* connects consumers to the region's rich culture through a variety of print, digital, mobile, tablet and event platforms. Sid is responsible for ensuring that the media powerhouse's digital franchises, 12+ annual special issues, dozens of books, special events and hundreds of licensed products-from furniture to plants-and now a hotel collection-reflect the brand's core mission and values. Sid is based in the company's Birmingham, Ala., offices.

Evans was previously vice president and editor-in-chief of *Garden & Gun*, was editor-in-chief of *Field & Stream*, editorial director of *Salt Water Sportsman* magazine, editor of *Men's Journal*, and has held senior editor positions at *GQ* and *Sports Afield*.

In addition to general sessions, the conference will offer breakout sessions on sports tourism, airport trends and other industry-related topics, tours of Charleston and an awards luncheon. Register today at www.SCGovCon.com and take advantage of the early bird discount!

First Day Hikes Scheduled at State Parks Jan. 1

More than 30 state parks in South Carolina will offer ranger-guided hikes, walks and special events on Friday, Jan. 1, to help launch the new year (and to get resolutions off to a good start.) The [First Day Hikes](#) are mostly walks along beaches and lakes, in forests or on historic trails, to help visitors learn more about the cultural and natural heritage of South Carolina and to get in some holiday exercise.

While most hikes are easy to moderate, one of the hikes at Table Rock State Park in Pickens County is a strenuous 7-mile climb to the top of the mountain. Additionally, a bike ride will be held at Santee State Park and "polar plunges" will be held at Devils Fork, Paris Mountain, Hunting Island, Aiken and Sadlers Creek state parks. Congaree National Park will join the movement for the first time in 2016, offering a twilight hike along the boardwalk trail that begins at 5 p.m.

"Traditionally, New Year's Day is a time to recharge and restart, and we're happy to offer ideal settings for people to do that," said Duane Parrish, Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism. "The trails and pathways in state parks are some of the most naturally scenic and historically significant in the state. Inspiring and re-affirming, they set the stage for enriching experiences in the South Carolina outdoors."

Park visitors who participate in First Day Hikes are encouraged to share their experiences on social media using the hashtag [#FirstDayHikes](#).

State parks are also inviting members of the Armed Forces to a friendly

competition during First Day Hikes to see which branch can cover the most miles in a single day. All personnel serving in the U.S. Army, Marines, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard must check in with park rangers when they arrive and report miles covered at the end of their hikes.

For a complete list of parks hosting hikes and events, click [here](#). Additional information about state parks can be found at [SouthCarolinaParks.com](#).

The Park Service's First Day Hikes are part of a national movement by the [America's State Parks](#) program to get more people out into the great outdoors on New Year's Day and to rediscover the beauty and significance of their natural heritage.

Governor Haley Announced 2016 Slate of South Carolina Chef Ambassadors

Pictured left to right are Chefs Forrest Parker, Ramone Dickerson, Steven Jankowski, Orchid Paulmeier, Brandon Velie and Teryi Youngblood.

Governor Nikki Haley named chefs Teryi Youngblood of *Passerelle Bistro* in Greenville, Ramone Dickerson of *2 Fat 2 Fly & Wing City* in Columbia, Orchid Paulmeier of *One Hot Mama's* on Hilton Head Island and Forrest Parker of *Old Village Post House* in Mount Pleasant as the 2016 South Carolina Chef Ambassadors.

"The Chef Ambassador Program proved to be a tremendous success last year, and we're excited to get started with another group of chefs for 2016," said Governor Haley. "South Carolina is moving in the right direction in so many ways - people are talking about our economy and they talk about our tourist destinations - and thanks to this program, they're talking about the unique experience you can find at restaurants in every corner of our state."

Each year, four chefs are selected to serve as the state's culinary ambassadors. These chefs embody the best of South Carolina's food scene, both in the quality of their provisions, as well as their dedication to using healthy, locally-grown ingredients.

"This initiative showcases South Carolina's wealth of agricultural resources," said South Carolina's Commissioner of Agriculture, Hugh Weathers. "These chefs, and many others, strive to consistently incorporate the state's vast produce offerings into their menus - which is wonderful to see and taste."

Throughout the year, the chef ambassadors will participate in a number of culinary and tourism specific events throughout the Southeast, hosting cooking demonstrations, conducting educational seminars and discussing the offerings found in the cities in which their establishments are based.

"Representing fantastic parts of our great state, this program allows these chefs to put a unique spotlight on not only their culinary talents, but the

place in South Carolina in which they live, work and play," said Duane Parrish, executive director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism. "We encourage visitors and locals alike to make the trip and dine in each of these top-notch restaurants. You won't be disappointed!"

In its second year, the South Carolina Chef Ambassador program was an initiative Governor Haley enacted in June of 2014 after the concept was brought to her by Chef Brandon Velie, executive chef at *Juniper* in Ridge Spring. Chef Velie, a 2015 South Carolina Chef Ambassador, will serve as an advisor to the 2016 slate, along with Chef Steven Jankowski, executive chef at the Governor's Mansion.

The 2016 Chef Ambassadors

Chef Teryi Youngblood

Chef Teryi Youngblood was named Chef de Cuisine of Passerelle Bistro when the restaurant opened in June 2013. With a menu full of French-inspired dishes, using the purest and freshest ingredients, Chef Youngblood does not believe in complicated food. Believing cooking should speak for itself, and the food should taste like what it is, she implements this thinking into her menu daily.

Chef Ramone Dickerson

The stuffed chicken wings created by Chef Ramone Dickerson and his business partner, Corey Simmons, landed a reality TV show on the Oprah Winfrey Network last year called Wingmen. Dickerson owns Wing City restaurant and the 2 Fat to Fly food truck, both in Columbia, where their unique approach to stuffing chicken wings with collard greens and rice, macaroni and cheese, jalepeno / bacon and cheddar, has generated a flock of fans. They also appeared on the Steve Harvey Show earlier this year.

Chef Forrest Parker

From Opryland to the Lowcountry, South Carolina native Chef Forrest Parker joined the Hall Management Group team of acclaimed chefs in 2012. He leads the culinary team at the Old Village Post House Inn. Charleston-educated and trained, Parker includes Southern ingredients and elements in his cooking throughout his career.

Chef Orchid Paulmeier

Chef Paulmeier was a contestant in the seventh season of the hit show, The Next Food Network Star. She opened One Hot Mama's on Hilton Head Island in 2007. Blending time-tested Southern favorites like collards, cornbread and slow-cooked barbecue and ribs with her own homespun recipes, One Hot Mama's serves up "comfort food with a kick."

About the South Carolina Chef Ambassadors Project:

An initiative of Governor Nikki Haley, the South Carolina Chef Ambassador program was enacted in 2014 to highlight and showcase the culinary offerings and tourism destinations found throughout the state of South Carolina. The program operates in conjunction with Governor Haley, as well as the South Carolina Department of Agriculture and the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism. For more information about the South Carolina Chef Ambassadors, please visit www.agriculture.sc.gov.

SCPRT Breaks Ground for New Welcome Center on I-77 at Fort Mill

Pictured left to right are Robbin Garvin, Manager of the welcome center; Bill Shanahan, York County Manager; Lisa Meadows, Director of the Rock Hill / York County CVB; Jayne Scarborough, Executive Director of the Olde English District Tourism Commission; Duane Parrish, SCPRT Director; Dinos Liollo, Principal and Market Leader of Liollo Architecture, and Andrew Cope of JM Cope Construction.

The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism broke ground in December for a new official state welcome center off Interstate 77 southbound in Fort Mill. The agency will replace the existing 34-year-old facility at this location with a 10,000-square-foot, modern building with significant customer service upgrades.

The \$4 million center is expected to open next fall. It was designed by Charleston-based Liollo Architecture and will be built by JM Cope Construction of Rock Hill. It is the first of two welcome center "total rebuilds" scheduled in South Carolina for 2016. The other is located on I-95 northbound near Hardeeville.

South Carolina's welcome centers are on the major interstates at the state's borders, at Santee on I-95 and on U.S. 17 in Little River. They were built across the state in the late 1960s to early 1980s to serve a growing traveling public. They contribute to the state's \$18 billion tourism economy through travel assistance, itinerary building and other support.

SCPRT Director Duane Parrish calls the welcome centers South Carolina's front porch, where we welcome our guests, saying these facilities must keep up with evolving traveler needs and expectations. "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 South Carolina Welcome Centers provide travel assistance and encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more while they are in the state.

Nearly 1 million visitors use the Fort Mill welcome center every year and the staff's assistance generates an estimated \$239,000 economic impact.

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

As an added measure of beauty and significance, the exterior brickwork of the new center will feature three distinct layers of color to mimic the soil samples taken from the center's grounds and also seen in local Catawba Pottery.

"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.

Grant from Duke Energy Foundation Will Help Build New Fishing Pier at Croft

Pictured left to right: David Fountain, Duke Energy State President for North Carolina; Phil Gaines, Director of SC State Parks; John Moon, Manager of Croft State Park, and Clark Gillespy, Duke Energy State President for South Carolina.

A \$75,000 grant from Duke Energy Foundation's Water Resources Fund will help build a new fishing pier at Croft State Park, providing greater access to fishing on Lake Craig. The pier is expected to open to the public by the late fall of 2016.

In addition to being a new platform for fishing and enjoying the lake, the pier also will feature educational signage that helps people understand the natural significance of the water and the wildlife that depends on it. The pier will be 100 feet long by 6 feet wide, with a broader platform of 40 feet long by 10 feet wide at the end.

"We are grateful to Duke Energy Foundation for providing a Water Resources Fund grant that helps us expand recreational opportunities at Croft State Park," said Duane Parrish, director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, which oversees state parks. "It will be a great place for Duke's customers and all park visitors to bring their families, fish the lake and spend quality time together."

The Water Resources Fund is a \$10 million commitment from Duke Energy to improve water quality, quantity and conservation in the Carolinas and neighboring regions. "This is an investment in healthier waterways and a

better quality of life for communities," said Shawn Heath, vice president of the Duke Energy Foundation and Community Affairs. "We look forward to our partnership with the South Carolina State Park Service and the impact this grant will have at Croft State Park and the South Carolina Upstate."

Currently, visitors at Croft fish from boat or from limited spots on the banks. The addition of the pier, which will have ADA-accessible sidewalk and ramps, as well as a parking area, opens up a higher level of access for more visitors.

Croft is a 7,000-acre state park along rolling, wooded terrain near Spartanburg. The park is widely known in the region for its equestrian facilities, including 20 miles of horse trails and an arena, but it also offers 17 miles of mountain bike trails and hiking trails. The park also has a playground, picnic shelters, picnic areas and camping.

About the Duke Energy Foundation

The Duke Energy Foundation provides philanthropic support to address the needs vital to the health of our communities. Annually, the Foundation funds more than \$25 million in charitable grants, with a focus on education, environment, economic and workforce development and community impact. Duke Energy has long been committed to supporting the communities where its customers and employees live and work, and will continue to build on this legacy.

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