



County's growth as tourist destination mirrors rise in population

By Stuart Korfhage

Posted Feb 4, 2018 at 2:00 AM

Updated at 6:28 AM

As new subdivisions pile up in St. Johns County, it's easy to see the reasons why potential residents are drawn here: weather, schools, proximity to beach, growing job opportunities, etc.

But one of the reasons this area has become so popular with new residents is that so many of them started as tourists. It's an industry that tracks its ascendance right along with housing development.

Once popular as a spring/summer beach destination, this county has turned into a place where there's rarely a weekend without crowds of visitors on St. Augustine's historic streets.

The increased traffic has fueled the creation of luxury hotels, high-end eateries and new attractions. And it's also added to the already robust real estate industry here.

"People come for a visit and they fall in love with it, and they start looking for properties while they're here to get a feel for housing costs in St. Augustine," said Victor Raymos of the St. Johns County/St. Augustine Board of Realtors.

That often leads to sales.

"Usually what they do is buy a piece of property that they intend to live in when they retire," Raymos said. "That may be three or four years down the road, but they buy it now to get today's pricing and then rent it out."

Because there is so much traffic in the Historic District, local agent Karen Zander said it makes sense to have an office as she does on Hypolita Street. She said tourists often wander in the doors of 97Park — as the brokerage is called — and become customers.

“We get a tremendous amount of interest from people who are here visiting,” she said. “A tremendous amount of interest from people who say, ‘What a great place to live. I love it here.’”

“Absolutely, that tourist traffic generates interest in the real estate market.”

In 2000, the county population was about 125,000. Since then, it has gained more than 100,000 residents as visitation has rapidly increased.

It makes sense that people would want to live in a place where they enjoyed a trip. But Florida welcomes more than 100 million visitors per year, and there is immense competition to lure those tourists and open their wallets.

Richard Goldman, the head of St. Johns County's visitors and convention bureau, said it's no accident that this area became a major destination after decades of being only partially discovered or appreciated.

Of course, the county's location and natural beauty were sure to land a certain amount of visitors, but Goldman said this destination first came to the nation's attention with the 400th anniversary of the founding of St. Augustine by the Spanish.

It also drew some unwanted attention during the civil rights era when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders encountered angry pushback during their quest to end segregation.

Tourism continued to move up as Florida gained popularity as a destination, the opening of Walt Disney World near Orlando in 1971 being a watershed moment.

Goldman said St. Augustine and the rest of the county grew in the 1980s, thanks in part to the creation of a marketing organization as the “bed tax” was adopted in 1986. He said the expansion of the University of Florida also played a role in the appeal of this area as more students found their way here.

“Once UF became this huge collector of young people and academics, the closest place (to go to the beach) was right at the end of (State Road) 206 at Crescent Beach,” Goldman said.

As a sign of St. Augustine’s effort to grow the tourism industry, the city introduced the Nights of Lights celebration that’s now closing its 24th year.

More recently, Goldman said Mumford & Sons’ Gentlemen of the Road Stopover in 2013, which preceded the 450th celebration in 2015, was a major lift for St. Augustine’s image as a place for younger travelers as much as older ones.

“We’ve hosted a lot of different people in the arts community, but that didn’t necessarily create these momentous awakenings to the destination the way this confluence of events (did),” Goldman said. “(It) all of a sudden created this new audience for us.”

Those events helped almost immediately as the county drew an estimated one million more visitors in 2015 (6.3 million) compared to 2014.

And why does this area continue to appeal to visitors and keep turning some of them into residents? Well, there are many reasons, but Goldman said a large part of it is because the destination continues to differentiate itself with true historic sites and comfortable beach spots.

“It (history) distinguishes us from other destinations,” Goldman said. “It’s Florida. There are beaches everywhere. Relatively lower density, that’s a benefit (here). Lack of high rises. That’s a thing that distinguishes us.”



SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL

Wake up to the day’s top news, delivered to your inbox

■