

Currituck boosts state's \$18B tourism industry

By Cindy Beamon
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BARCO — Travel and tourism is a big money-maker in North Carolina despite the state's nearly flat investment into the industry, an official with the state Department of Commerce told Currituck business owners and local officials Thursday.

Visitor spending is up in all the state's 100 counties, even in a struggling economy, said Linda Minges, the commerce department's assistant secretary of tourism, marketing and global branding.

Minges was guest speaker Thursday at a Currituck Chamber of Commerce awards luncheon at the Cooperative Extension Center in Barco.

Minges said the state and Currituck are reaping rewards in tax dollars.

Visitors spent \$18 billion last year in North Carolina, making it the sixth most visited state in the nation, she said.

Only California, Florida, Texas, New York and Pennsylvania had more visitors in 2011, she said.

Statewide, the tourism industry contributed \$1 billion in state taxes.

In Currituck alone, travel and tourism reaped \$5.5 million in state taxes.

The industry has grown even though the state has not increased its investment in recent years, said Minges.

For the past two years, the state has contributed about \$10 million toward promoting travel and tourism despite the rising costs for promotions and advertising, she said.

Compared to other states, North Carolina is 27th in how much it spends in promoting the industry.

Minges said that has forced the department to work harder and smarter to make the most of advertising dollars.

The state campaign is aimed at highlighting North Carolina's unique assets, including the Corolla Wild Horses, which is featured in this year's advertising campaign.

The state's advertising team spend three days on the Outer Banks to come up with the ad, she said.

"The place was just mesmerizing," she recalled.

Another state ad features North Carolina mountains, and a unique bear-shaped shadow that naturally occurs twice a year.

“Nobody has this but North Carolina,” said Minges.

All the state’s advertisements — on line and in print — are designed to show visitors what is unique about the state, she said.

New advertisements-in-the-making will feature the fresnel lens in the Currituck Light House, a wild horse herder and a beach house on the off-road beaches.

All will be part of the state’s Project 543 featuring unique spots across North Carolina, covering 543 miles from Manteo on the coast to Murphy in the mountains, the state’s tourism and travel website says.

Currituck has spent its advertising dollars wisely by partnering with the state, said Minges.

She pointed to ads in magazines like Southern Living and O Magazine, where Currituck paid a fraction of the double-truck’s cost to include a plug for the county.

Minges also applauded Currituck’s use of online advertising and social media to spread the word to vacationers.

Currituck’s use of Facebook and Twitter is “hands down, the best in the state,” said Minges.