

Marketer: Currituck 'hemorrhaging' tourism dollars to Dare

By Cindy Beamon
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Currituck beaches need more places to eat and shop to keep from "hemorrhaging money" to Dare County, a travel marketing expert told county officials Wednesday.

Vacationers want more choices and are driving farther than they prefer to get them, said Judy Randall with Randall Travel Marketing.

The county hired Randall five years ago to develop a marketing strategy for Currituck's then-fledgling travel and tourism department. On Wednesday, she offered her assessment of what the county needs to do next.

Randall praised Currituck for growing the county's top revenue-producing industry.

"The return on your investment is huge," said Randall.

Since 2001, the county's collection of occupancy taxes, a 6 percent levy on vacationers' lodging, has tripled to an anticipated \$10 million this year.

To continue the upward trend, Currituck will need to make some serious decisions, said Randall.

First, the county needs to find ways to give vacationers what they want, she said.

Randall's team interviewed and surveyed more than 500 vacationers for the study to find out what they liked and didn't like about the resort.

What she found was they wanted more dining choices, shopping and lodging options.

What they didn't like was the long drive — often aggravated by traffic slow-ups.

Vacationers would prefer to shop and eat closer to their beach rentals, but are traveling to Dare County because of limited choices, she said.

Randall said the county also needs to expand its customer base by offering more visitor options, besides the beach. At present, almost all of Currituck's visitors come in pursuit of leisure during summer months.

"Right now most of your industry is in one basket," said Randall.

Successful resorts draw not only vacationers, but also business travelers, sports enthusiasts, and visitors going to special events, she said.

“Even though life is good, you are missing out on the big buffet,” Randall said.

Expanding the county’s customer base will require “strong leadership” beyond the expertise of Currituck Board of Commissioners that currently doubles as the county’s Tourism Development Authority, Randall said.

She said people in the travel industry are better equipped to guide a successful marketing strategy.

Expanding Currituck’s tourism efforts not only benefits visitors but also residents, Randall said.

Currituck residents already pay lower taxes because of tourism, she said.

“The money (vacationers) spend keeps you from having to raise property taxes.”

Taxes from tourism already lower taxes in Currituck by \$470 a person or \$1,200 a household, according to figures from Randall Travel Marketing.

Randall said the tax benefits could be even better.

In Dare County, taxes from tourism reduce taxes by \$5,400 per household, the study said.

That’s 4.5 times more than Currituck, partly because Dare has more housing units, but not entirely, she noted. Part of Dare’s income comes from vacationers in Currituck.

“Somebody’s eating your lunch,” said Randall.