

Business

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Grand Strand's publicity grant doubles

By Emma Ritch - The Sun News

Grand Strand tourism officials will have more money than ever to market the area to new visitors starting this fall.

The State Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism on Wednesday awarded the industry a record \$5 million for promotion, which with the local contribution adds up to \$15 million for targeted advertising.

The grant was double last year's to the area and was the maximum the state could initially award to any single destination.

"Today's contribution from our state government is the largest in our history," said Woody Crosby, owner of the Crown Reef Resort and chairman of Myrtle Beach Golf Holiday.

The state has \$5 million remaining in tourism promotion grants, and PRT Director Chad Prosser said he's confident the Grand Strand will likely get another cut once awards have been made to other destinations, such as Hilton Head Island and Charleston.

The General Assembly saved the tourism grants with a two-thirds vote to override Gov. Mark Sanford's veto of the funds, said S.C. Rep. Alan Clemmons, R-Myrtle Beach.

"It means the state of South Carolina has recognized the hospitality industry, and the tourism industry has finally made it to the top of the list," said Frans Mustert, president and chief executive of Patricia Resorts in Myrtle Beach.

Prosser said the state wanted tourism to grow from its current \$16 billion statewide economic impact to \$40 billion by 2020. The Grand Strand market is key to that growth, he said.

"It's the largest tourism market in South Carolina; it's the core of the engine that drives South Carolina's economy," Prosser said.

State Rep. Tracy Edge, R-North Myrtle Beach, authored legislation for the grant

program. Edge said he questioned why Sanford vetoed the money but was thrilled "to see us get the positive publicity and the dollars that come with the award."

Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President Brad Dean said it's essential for the area to increase promotional spending because competing destinations are doing the same.

The Grand Strand also has more hotel rooms to fill than ever before, he said.

"This is the biggest investment the state has ever made in our tourism industry, and it comes at a time when we desperately need to grow our visitor base."

Prosser noted the economic uncertainty across the nation makes it the perfect time to increase tourism promotion. People are still taking vacations, and the Grand Strand can increase its market share because ad rates likely will be cheaper and some destinations might cut back on their promotional spending, he said.

David Brittain, chairman of the chamber's board of directors, credited the voluntary \$1-room-night fee as the reason the area was able to raise so much money for the matching grant.

The chamber, along with the lodging and golf industries, raised \$10 million to qualify for the 50 percent state match.

"This match will go a long way to broadening our marketing reach and help sustain and grow our number one industry," said state Sen. Luke Rankin, R-Myrtle Beach.

In 2006 - the first year the grants were awarded - Myrtle Beach initially secured \$2.5 million, Charleston \$750,000 and Hilton Head \$250,000. The Grand Strand then acquired the remaining \$1.5 million, Prosser said.

Hotelier Dorothy Anderson called it a great day for tourism on the Strand. "Myrtle Beach has been underfunded for years and years and years, and this is the first time I think we've been given an equal chance," she said.

Anderson said the Grand Strand's ability to double its contribution to the 2-for-1 matching program shows that business leaders here can accomplish anything if they work together.

Staff writer Zane Wilson contributed to this report.