**Kentucky is Now a Tourism State, and That’s Important**

Kentucky is riding a tourism wave that promises to grow, adding to its already impressive contributions to the state’s economy.

Tourism-related businesses and convention bureaus across the Commonwealth work tirelessly to cement Kentucky’s name in the tourism industry. And the results speak for themselves.

The success of Kentucky Tourism Commissioner Kristen Branscum and other tourism and culinary leaders in snagging Bravo’s current season of Top Chef, which was shot throughout and highlights Kentucky, is a marquee example of the current media love affair with the Bluegrass State.

Media coverage doesn’t just happen though. It’s one of those “one-plus-one-equals-three” equations: increased visitor interest combines with aggressive efforts by state and local destination marketing organizations to yield media coverage, and that coverage propels even more visits to Kentucky.

Kentucky’s recognition nationally and internationally as a top travel destination comes after years of dedicated work to promote all that Kentucky has to offer visitors. Our emergence as a “tourism state” provides an annual economic impact exceeding $15 billion and over 196,000 jobs, placing tourism among the elite drivers of Kentucky’s economy. As Kentuckians, we should take pride in knowing that the Commonwealth is finally being recognized for all the reasons we love our state.

Kentuckians unquestionably recognize agriculture as one of our state’s vital industries. With a projected $5.7 billion in agricultural sales in 2018, according to UK agriculture economists, there is no doubt how important agriculture is to our state.

Meanwhile, tourism sales, as represented by visitor expenditures, reached a record high level of $9.2 billion in 2017. Even though tourism drives nearly $3.5 billion more in economic impact, Kentuckians don’t often recognize tourism’s major importance to our state’s economy. But that can change as Kentuckians realize the explicit impact tourism has on their everyday lives.

The economic impact of tourism not only helps local businesses, but it is a major boon to state and local tax coffers to the tune of $1.57 billion each year. Or to put it another way, each Kentucky family would have to pay an additional $1,200 each year in taxes if it were not for the tax dollars generated by our tourism industry.

Kentucky’s tourism impact is felt beyond its direct benefits by also serving as a powerful marketing tool for products made in Kentucky including bourbon, Corvettes, Toyotas, Louisville Slugger baseball bats, and Ale-8-One, to name a few. Producers of these and other products have come to understand that offering visitor experiences such as tours and museums builds brand awareness and loyalty, which ultimately drives sales.

Consider some of tourism’s impressive economic attributes: tourism possesses a unique distinction as a statewide industry that benefits local economies throughout every corner of the commonwealth, a claim that few industries can make. In fact, there is no better Kentucky industry fostering small businesses and entrepreneurs than tourism. And with Kentucky’s increasing appeal to foreign tourists, tourism is becoming one of Kentucky’s fastest growing exports.

The General Assembly faces a myriad of difficult issues that often boil down to too few dollars to address too many problems. In the midst of those issues, the tourism wave continues to grow, carrying with it more tax revenue, more jobs and more economic activity. Legislators’ investment in tourism promotion only increases this boom for Kentucky’s economy.

As one of Kentucky’s most powerful economic engines, our industry looks forward to helping legislators hit the accelerator, avoid the brakes, and capture increasing opportunities that come from being a tourism state.

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