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Tourism goals focus of Clarion meeting



Photo by Heather Lesknic - Meredith Hill, executive policy manager for the state DCNR, was a featured speaker Thursday during a breakfast meeting in Clarion that was coordinated by the Clarion County Economic Development Corp. and the Clarion Area Chamber of Business & Industry. Other speakers were (from left) Mike Vereb, general manager of the Foxburg Inn, Great Outdoors Visitors Bureau director Dave Morris, and Larry McFadden, who owns Top Hill Cabins in Cook Forest.

CLARION - There is a strong interest in capitalizing on the economic opportunities that exist in connection with the natural and varied assets of the Pennsylvania Wilds region, a state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources official said Thursday.

At the same time, executive policy manager Meredith Hill said, "we want to do it in a way that does not change the fundamental character of our communities."

She was one of several speakers at a breakfast meeting coordinated through the Clarion County Economic Development Corp. and Clarion Area Chamber of Business & Industry.

Clarion County is part of PA Wilds, a 12-county region that offers outdoor experiences unparalleled in the nation with more than two million acres of public lands, 29 state parks and hundreds of miles of land and water trails.

Hill said the state department has invested more than \$5.5 million in marketing for the region, which is outpacing some of the other tourism areas in the state.

The initiative was launched in 2003 in recognition of these natural assets with namesake marketing and investments.

Officials say the idea is to market the area to tourists while simultaneously helping local communities capitalize on the benefits and deal with the challenges of increased visitation

Dave Morris, director of the Great Outdoors Visitors Bureau based in Brookville, said the Cook Forest State Park area draws roughly 600,000 visitors each year.

Local destinations

Cook Forest and the borough of Foxburg are considered important attributes in the business of tourism, Morris said during the meeting held at the Clarion Holiday Inn.

Foxburg is continuing to raise its profile as a tourism destination, offering quality retail, recreation and lodging opportunities.

Mike Vereb, general manager of the Foxburg Inn, said most of their clientele are from southwest Pennsylvania and northeast Ohio.

``We target our advertising in that direction," he said.

Vereb stressed the importance of networking, adding the hotel is a member of the Clarion Area, Butler, Franklin and Oil City chambers of commerce as well as the Armstrong County tourism promotion agency.

``I'm very enthusiastic about the progress we're making," Vereb said of the community's revival.

It is largely a result of continued investments by Foxburg resident Dr. Arthur Steffee.

Vereb said the hotel's girlfriends getaway packages are popular.

Pennsylvania is one of the nation's leading travel destinations and is poised for growth, said Hill.

The state ranks fourth in the United States in both overnight and day trip leisure travel.

Hill said the DCNR has invested \$6.8 million in the Cook Forest and Clear Creek parks, \$1.2 million in grant awards to Clarion County communities, and \$1.1 million at the Sawmill Center for the Arts at Cook Forest.

Hotel occupancy statistics for the PA Wilds region showed 954,000 rooms were sold last year, an increase of 6.5 percent over 2007.

Room revenues were shown at \$71.3 million last year, a 12 percent increase over the previous year.

Larry McFadden, owner of Top Hill Cabins in Cook Forest, said vacancies are rare come summer.

He and his wife bought the business when they moved back to the area from Texas in 2000.

``Our business has increased from \$40,000 a year to over \$130,000 as gross income," said McFadden.

Cabin rental numbers have been strong throughout the Great Outdoors area in spite of the economic downturn, said Morris.

He said it appears cabins are being rented by more local residents as families choose to stay closer to home.

McFadden said cabins are sometimes booked a year in advance in the summer months.

A cabin fever special with reduced rates in January, February and March ``works very well," he said.

He said facilities have improved over the years.

``Cabins are now like little houses," said McFadden.

Those in the tourism industry appreciate the assistance from state, county and tourism officials.

`` They all help us succeed," he said.

Morris said the bureau conducts cooperative marketing efforts with cable TV, consumer and trade shows and advertising.

Clarion County's room tax committee determines how the bureau spends a portion of the money, he said.

He said they regularly advertise in Pittsburgh area publications, including the Pittsburgh Magazine.

`` A lot of people don't know what's in their backyard or what's in the state," said Hill.

Great Outdoors is reducing the number of Go Magazine issues it produces each year due to concerns over the economy, Morris said.

There will be two issues of the publication, which promotes events and activities for the region, instead of four.

Developing trail systems

Hill said the economic impact of trail systems in the state shouldn't be ignored.

She said the 320-mile Great Allegheny Passage Trail results in \$12 million in revenues a year while the 60-mile Oil Heritage Region Trail System provides a \$4 million per year impact.

There is now a multi-county initiative to explore trail development possibilities along the Knox and Kane Railroad corridor.

`` That could have a tremendous impact on the region," said Hill.

Clarion County commissioners have pledged their support toward the effort, and McKean County has expressed its willingness to serve as the primary applicant to secure funding assistance through the DCNR.

A regional trails workshop is being held Saturday, May 30, at the Penn State campus in DuBois.

Hill also invited individuals to check the PA Wilds Resource Center online at www.pawildsresources.org.

The site provides information for entrepreneurs, outdoor groups, community leaders and residents and includes free online classifieds for tourism-related businesses and groups; a database of what loans, grants and technical assistance programs are available to small tourism businesses in each county of the PA Wilds; plus details on the Design Guide, Artisan Trail, logo use and more.

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