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Luncheon focuses on importance of tourism in Fayette County

By Paul Sunyak, Herald-Standard
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WHARTON TWP. - "Synergy" was the buzzword that Fayette County Commissioner Sean M. Cavanagh used to describe the second annual Tourism Summit luncheon held Monday morning at Nemaocolin Woodlands Resort & Spa.

Cavanagh, who emceed the event for more than 200 attendees, zeroed in on tourism's importance to the county economy. Citing statistics obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Cavanagh said tourism generated \$258 million worth of economic activity in the county in 2000.

"It's big business in Fayette County," said Cavanagh, who recited the following year 2000 statistics:

? Tourism was responsible for \$177 million in direct and indirect economic activity, with direct activity being such things as the rental you pay for a room and indirect being such things as the supplies the hotel ordered to accommodate your stay.

? Tourism generated another \$81.3 million in "induced" economic activity, which covers such things as the wages earned by employees in that industry.

? Tourism accounted for 5,265 jobs in Fayette County and \$28.9 million worth of taxes.

Regarding tourism's importance, Cavanagh noted, "It's not the sole answer in Fayette County ... but it's an important element. He noted that the synergy created at the summit, attended by elected officials, tourism stakeholders large and small, and interested others was a key element in nurturing the industry

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for everyone's benefit.

"This is for the big guys as well as the little guys," said Cavanagh, who added that bringing people together to develop a strategic vision was crucial to tourism's continued success - and to maintaining the juggernaut currently under way in that area.

Fayette County Commission Chairman Vincent A. Vicites, one of nine speakers at the event, said tourism remains a vital "spoke in the wheel of economic development" within the county. Vicites said the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau has done a good job of promoting tourism in the county and the region, an effort that everyone agrees should include attempts at getting visitors to see more things and book more overnight stays.

"We have the best cultural and recreational tourism of any county in Pennsylvania," said Vicites, who added that it's time to update the county's strategic plan as it concerns tourism efforts.

Raymond C. Polaski, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, underscored tourism's importance by noting that a 65-room Super 8 motel being built in the Fayette County Business Park wouldn't exist without tourism-related demand.

Polaski added that the motel owners are currently seeking a restaurant franchise to add to their Route 40 development - a tangible growth opportunity fueled largely by the need to feed tourists.

Citing figures from an Associate Press story about tourism's impact in Johnstown, Polaski said that each night a tourist spends in a community translates into \$268. He said if some of the 140,000 annual visitors to Fallingwater or the 1 million annual visitors to Ohiopyle State Park could be coaxed to spend an extra night here, it would have a profound effect.

Those figures were provided by Annie Urban of the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, who also spoke during the summit luncheon.

However, Barb Gibel of Fay-Penn Economic Development Council, who spoke later in the program, pegged the number of Ohiopyle visitors at 2.1 million in year 2000. Gibel said that although Fayette attracts 3.6 million visitors per year, the county is not "visitor friendly" enough when compared to other areas.

Gibel said surveys have shown that the average satisfaction and value ratings are low as judged by visitors to the Laurel Highlands, a shortcoming those involved in tourism need to study and improve upon.

Gibel said Fay-Penn plans to help launch a regional cable television tourism channel that would cover 11 counties, reach 500,000 households and impact 1 million viewers. She said Fay-Penn also plans to help promote tourism by helping develop a coal and coke museum, and by setting up informational kiosks in strategic locations.

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