

TRAVEL & TOURISM

# Tourism vital to Brunswick's economy

## Brunswick's vacation home boom

The total number of seasonal homes in Brunswick County has grown steadily in recent decades.

2010: 23,941

2000: 15,540

1990: 12,737

1980: 3,735

1970: 322

Source: U.S. Census

Beaches, golf courses help county lead state in vacation homes

By Adam Wagner  
StarNews Staff

BRUNSWICK COUNTY – In the offseason, Tony Ezziddine sits at the desk of Local Call Surf Shop in Oak Island, shuffling a well-worn deck of cards and playing countless games of solitaire.

"It's a tough call because it's a seasonal business, but we're open year-round," Ezziddine said. "... You have more friends than money."

When the tourism season kicks off on Memorial Day, though, Ezziddine bumps his staff up from two employees to six and

makes enough money to keep the door open during the off-season. Since buying the shop in 1991, Ezziddine said he has seen a steady increase in the number of tourists frequenting Oak Island.

Brunswick County has

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# TOURISM

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the most vacation homes in North Carolina, with 23,941, according to the 2010 Census, the most recent available numbers. Between 2000 and 2010, Brunswick added 8,401 vacation homes – widening the gap between it and second-place Carteret County from 2,000 homes to more than 8,500.

"You can find homes oceanfront or on a canal or on the marsh, or you can get a condo or a villa on the golf course," said Mitzi York, the executive director of the Brunswick County Tourism Development Authority.

Oak Island, where Ezzi-dine's store is located, saw its number of seasonal or recreational homes jump from 3,262 homes to 4,709 between 2000 and 2010.

One of the companies taking advantage of that growth is Oak Island Accommodations, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

Since opening up shop in 1991, the company has grown from managing 100 rental properties to about 700 now, said Melaney Robbins, the company's vice president.

"This area is certainly very busy," Robbins said, adding that homeowners are marketing both newly built and newly purchased houses with the accommodation company.

While she would not give specific numbers as to how many rental properties the accommodations company has added in recent years, Robbins did say they've had to hire additional property management staff.

## More than the beach

Tourists spent nearly a half-billion dollars in Brunswick County in 2014 – the last year for



Woody Cox, from Southeastern Virginia, returns keys from his rental to Gloria Jones while checking out on Saturday at Alan Holden Vacations in Holden Beach. Cox and his family have been visiting Holden Beach since the early 1990s. MATT BORN/STARNEWS

## Visitor growth

Tourism spending in Brunswick County has grown steadily since 1991, the first year data is available.

2014: \$496.32 million

2013: \$470.58 million

2012: \$445.87 million

2011: \$418.03 million

2010: \$395.38 million

2005: \$336.55 million

2000: \$243.51 million

1991: \$122.61 million

Source: U.S. Travel Association

which data is available – according to The Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties, a study prepared for Visit NC by the U.S. Travel Association.

According to past studies, tourism expenditures in the county grew by slightly more than \$100 million from 2010 to 2014, when the county ranked ninth out of North Carolina's 100 counties.

"The beaches are by far our number one attraction in the Brunswick islands," York said, "but we also see a lot of people visit because of golf or they're planning to hold a destination wedding or they're enjoying the other outdoor activities we have."

About 40 percent of Brunswick's visitors come from inside North Carolina, York added, with

about 60 percent coming from out-of-state.

Northeastern states including New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania are among the main areas tourists come from, while Charlotte is particularly popular in-state.

Many of Oak Island Accommodations' clients are in-state, but the second-most-popular market is Ohio.

"There is definitely more going on. We're not seeing a slowdown like we used to," Robbins said, adding the area had a strong Easter this year and that more clients are trickling in before Memorial Day and after Labor Day than before.

## The more things change ...

As more tourists discover Brunswick County, some are working to maintain a sense of familiarity.

At Frosty's Ice Cream Antiques & Shells, on Oak Island's East Beach Drive, Alan and Wendy Heckman have been scooping ice cream and selling antiques, shells and the occasional baseball card for 12 years.

"We remember how magical it was to go to the beach when you were kids," Alan Heckman said, "and we try to keep things the same as they were the year before."