Greetings,

Harford County tourism is a significant part of the local economy. Visitor spending at County businesses is over $300 million a year, resulting both in business support and thousands of jobs. We've added new hotels, restaurants and activity centers over the past few years that contribute to the success of local tourism. In February, advocates from our own Tourism Advisory Board joined 200 other tourism professionals from around the state at Tourism Day in Annapolis to urge legislative support of the tourism industry.

In this issue of EDAB e-news, you'll see for yourself the current impact of the tourism industry, and learn more about how tourism can be an important part of the County's growth. We want to keep visitors coming to our hotels, eating in our restaurants and enjoying all the activities the County has to offer. Don't miss this month's Business Spotlight highlighting extended-stay property, Hilton Homewood Suites. Tourism Fast Facts this month are also enlightening and impressive.

For more information on EDAB and its role in advocating for positive economic growth in the County, or to become involved in EDAB, visit www.harfordbusiness.org.

Best regards,

Eric McLauchlin
Chairman
EDAB

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Fueling the Tourism Industry

By Becky Fitzgerald & Monica Worrell
Co-Chairs, Harford County Tourism Advisory Board

Harford County Tourism has been busily building a destination marketing program to attract people to the County. It's like a shiny new race car at the starting block ready to rumble, but its fuel tank is already low. That tank can be easily filled with the passage of HB1395, which provides for a lodging tax in the County, enabling that shiny car to become a front runner in a race that contributes heavily to the area's economic development.

This lodging tax would advance the County's tourism business by allowing the industry to be self-funding. The tax would be paid not by residents of Harford County, but by people visiting the County from other areas. Harford County is the only county in Maryland that does not have a lodging tax, yet the potential for a robust tourism business that can bring growth and economic development to the area is huge.

Currently, tourism-related businesses support over 6,000 jobs in Harford County, and visitors spend over $300 million annually at local organizations. The Harford County office of Tourism is charged with reaching potential visitors and promoting local attractions and businesses. Every county in Maryland has a similar organization, and they all work with the Maryland Office of Tourism to promote the state's assets. In fact, a recent study showed that the Maryland Office of Tourism's 2011 Maryland advertising campaign generated $182 million in incremental visitor spending and 1,804 new tourism jobs. One dollar spent on the campaign ads returned $221 in visitor spending, more than $31 in state and local revenue, and nearly $7 in state sales tax revenue.

Imagine what could be done in Harford County with a dedicated funding source from a lodging tax. The County has an undeniable opportunity to build both its tourism effort and its economic development effort. Simply, tourism is economic development. Already, over one million people a year visit Harford County. Sports and entertainment venues like Cedar Lane and Ripken Stadium make it more of a destination spot. Visitors to events at these facilities also dine in restaurants, shop on Main Streets and visit historic and cultural attractions. They are drawn to the waterfront, world-class golf, three state parks and unique farm activities - otherwise known as Ag Tourism. Harford County is a place people want to visit.

To continue to promote the benefits of tourism in Harford County, the Office of Tourism needs to have a "voice" in an incredibly noisy tourism marketplace. Harford County must be able to break out of the crowd with an effective destination marketing program. Businesses and hotels have committed to this program because they see the potential for both their own businesses and the County's economy. The race car is buffed up and ready for fuel.
The hotel tax would be that fuel. Not only would the tax let the industry advance itself by investing the dollars it generates back into its own promotion, it would also move the funding of tourism promotion from Harford County tax payers and businesses to out-of-town visitors.

The business community and local citizens support this measure, including the Chamber of Commerce, The Route 40 Business Association, the Economic Development Advisory Board and the Tourism Advisory Board. There is no opposition to the legislation. The tourism community is clearly united in its support of this tax, and clearly in need of the funding. It is an opportunity to passively broaden a tax base. It is an opportunity to be in the race for positive economic growth.

**Business Spotlight: Homewood Suites by Hilton**

For many guests at the Homewood Suites by Hilton in Bel Air/Riverside, the hotel is a home away from home for a weekend, a month or even several months. The extended-stay hotel, which opened in Harford County in 2009, has 92 suites designed for people who need lodging for more than a few nights. According to Director of Sales Patricia Parker, Hilton saw the demand for an extended-stay property as the result of BRAC and APG, as well as increased activity at local sports and entertainment venues.

While government business remains a consistent source of clients for many of Harford’s hotel properties, hoteliers like Parker are finding it critical to attract additional sources of business such as sports and leisure. These sectors generally return a higher room rate than that of the current government per diem of $83.00. The challenge, Parker says, is expanding on the mainstay of weekday government clients. “While we value our government contracts, it makes good business sense to diversify our client mix. New business expansion, amateur sporting events, and other group travel, such as meetings and weddings, have created new opportunities for both market share and revenue growth,” she noted.

The marketing reach for one franchise hotel can be limited, so Parker says she encourages an increased investment in destination marketing. “Harford County has the amenities, location and appeal to attract more overnight guests. We just need more presence in the marketplace to help grow our business,” she said.

Homewood Suites by Hilton offers a small meeting facility that can accommodate 25-30 people for a seminar or luncheon. Its comfortable suites offer fully equipped kitchens, separate sleeping and living areas and high-speed internet access. Guests can also take advantage of complimentary hot breakfast and a “Welcome Home” dinner on weeknights.

Parker emphasized that Homewood Suites by Hilton takes pride in helping guests find their way when they arrive in Harford County and throughout their stay. The hotel’s front desk staff provides services much like a concierge, staying abreast of local events, attractions, and dining opportunities. The staff of 25 full-time employees is specially trained to make each guest feel at home in a “friendly, come-as-you are environment,” Parker noted. “The front desk employees strive to know and understand their guests, relaying a comfortable, community feeling.”

**Tourism Fast Facts**

- An estimated 1,555,170 people visited Harford County in 2012. Visitors spend more than $300 million at local businesses every year.
- Over 6,400 jobs in Harford County are supported by tourism, with 4,061 people directly employed in the industry. Approximately 98 percent of tourism businesses are small businesses.
- The Tourism Industry generated $10,896,037 in state and local tourism tax revenue in FY2012 - a five percent increase over FY2011. Harford County is the only county in Maryland that does not have a lodging tax.
- Every 256 visits generates enough state and local tax revenue to fund a public school student for one year.

Sources: Comptroller of Maryland; Harford Tourism - survey of local attractions; Tourism Economics Study on MD Counties