

EDC session focuses on tourism: International travel is a market that remains untapped, one speaker says

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OKALOOSA ISLAND — Tourism is strong in Okaloosa County, but it could always be better.

The Okaloosa County Economic Development Council hosted a roundtable symposium Wednesday to discuss the economic impact the tourism industry has on the area and ways to attract more visitors. Nearly 150 people attended the session, which

was the first EDC program dedicated specifically to tourism and the arts.

“Tourism is a major driver of the economy,” said Rick Harper, director of the University of West Florida’s Office of Economic Development and Engagement.

“The challenge that the tourism community has is to make sure we get visitors during the shoulder seasons,” Harper added. “That’s so important to our amenities and to make sure the industry can survive on a year-round basis.”

Tourism revenues account for about 35 percent of all sales during the summer months, Harper said. However, that number falls to below 15 percent in the off season. Harper said Fort Walton Beach, Pensacola and Panama City are the most seasonal economies in Florida.

Martin Owen, a spokesperson for ResortQuest, said one way to expand Northwest Florida’s tourism industry is to market the area to international travelers. Owen said tourists from overseas typically book their trips six to nine months in advance, vacation for up to three weeks and spend four times more, on average, than tourists from other parts of the United States.

“Expanding our tourist season with new tourists and new markets is economic development,” Owen said. “It is developing new business every bit as much as approaching new businesses. This type of expansion will keep our residents employed all year rather than just seasonally.”

Owen said Northwest Florida does not have an international tourist market because there no international flights serve the region.

Mark Bellinger, executive director of the Okaloosa County Tourist Development Council, said the county could work with another city that has direct international flights to bring overseas travelers to Northwest Florida.

“Maybe we can partner with some international groups and PR firms and go after that new business that we really haven’t gone after before,” Bellinger said.

Shane Moody, president and CEO of the Destin Area Chamber of Commerce, urged the audience to not forget that residents live in a popular tourist destination.

“It gives us a great opportunity here to live on vacation,” Moody said. “We live, work and play on vacation every single day. When you take a vacation, it’s hard to go somewhere, but it’s fabulous to come back home.

“I encourage all of you to not forget that you live on vacation here,” he added. “Live like a tourist.”