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Officials promote new PR initiatives and longer stays for Fayette County tourists

By Frances Borsodi Zajac fzajac@heraldstandard.com Apr 26, 2019



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Ann Nemanic, left, executive director of Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, enthusiastically greets Tom Guihe Living Treasures Wild Animal Park in Donegal, at the Fayette County Visitor Information Center at the intersection of Routes 40 and 381 in Farmington during a 2018 backyard tour for members of the tourism and hospitality industry. A partnership with Fayette County Commissioners, Nemaocolin Woodlands, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County and LHVB, the center served about 5,000 visitors from 46 states in 2018. The requested information on dining, hiking, attractions, Frank Lloyd Wright homes and lodging.

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Tourism continues to be an important industry in Fayette County, attracting visitors, who come for recreation, resorts, historic landmarks and the beautiful landscape.

Visitors this past year took in events that included the U.S. Collegiate Athletic Association Division II Women's Basketball Champions at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus as well as various celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the completion of the eastern portion of the Historic National Road, America's first federal highway.

They biked and hiked the Great Allegheny Passage and the developing Sheepskin Trail, explored Laurel Caverns, and played at area waterways and forests as well as state and national parks. They visited historic landmarks, festival and fairs.

Recognizing tourism's value to the local economy, the Fayette County Commissioners, Fayette Chamber of Commerce and the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau work together to grow the industry.

The commissioners and chamber are continuing a positive public relations initiative that started with social media in 2017 and added a new county logo and website (www.FayetteCountyPA.org) in 2018.

Kristi Kassimer, public relations, digital media specialist for The Redstone Foundation, observed, "We've made great strides since launching the effort in November 2017. In particular, the county social media network is resonating well with audiences, especially our nearly 3,000 Facebook followers. Residents can keep up with all Fayette County happenings on social media by searching @FayetteCpounty PA on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter."

Muriel Nuttall, executive director, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, noted in a press release, "By promoting the county's many positive attributes, such as our world-class tourism and recreational sites, thriving agricultural industry and growing business opportunities, this project has helped open people's eyes to all we have to offer."

LHVB continues to encourage multi-day visits to the area.

"We are emphasizing stays," said Ann Nemanic, LHVB executive director. "You need to come to Fayette County and experience all the region has to offer. You can't do it all in one day. You absolutely need two nights at a minimum. We are emphasizing three nights or more."

And there are results for these efforts.

Nemanic said the Laurel Highlands region, which includes Fayette, Somerset and Westmoreland counties, saw an 8.3 percent increase in occupancy that translated into a 9.11 percent increase in revenue for its lodging properties in 2018.

Once visitors arrive, the Fayette County Visitor Information Center can be a helpful source.

Located at 3738 National Pike (Route 40) in Farmington, the visitors center is a cooperative effort between Fayette County, LHVB, Fayette Chamber and Nemaquin Woodlands Resort. The center hosted a soft opening in 2017, serving about 1,800 from 34 states. But an official grand opening in 2018 brought in about 5,000 visitors from May through October with officials noting not everyone formally checked in.

Visitors who stopped by the center came from 46 states with the highest numbers from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, West Virginia and Virginia. Nemanic said the top five information requests were for dining, hiking, attractions, Frank Lloyd Wright homes and lodging.

“We’re finding many visitors who come early in the season for a quick stop return later. That’s great,” said Nemanic. “It’s serving a purpose by planting a seed for a return visit. We know it’s working.”

Nemanic also noted a number of current tourism trends relevant to Fayette County:

Family Adventures: “Children are becoming more and more important as a travel influence. It’s something that’s discussed as a family. Children want something more adventurous than what was once a traditional family trip to the beach,” said Nemanic, noting this can include local outdoor adventures.

Tracing Your Roots: The proliferation of ancestry kits to determine ancestry and television shows, such as “Finding Your Roots” and “Who Do You Think You Are?” are leading people to think about their own families.

“Now visitors are incorporating that into their travel experiences – tracing their roots in the United States and abroad,” said Nemanic, noting the area’s many historical societies and libraries have records that are a resource for visitors.

Road Trip: “People are hitting the roads instead of flying as an option for families,” said Nemanic, who noted AAA reports families are taking shorter trips but with an itinerary more focused on destinations that include museums and cultural attractions.

Luxury in Nature: “They are combining nature with a luxury experience where they can visit a world-renown resort like Nemaquin Woodlands and walk out and immerse themselves in nature,” said Nemanic. “Fayette County is such a nature-based experience for those who are looking for health and wellness. Hiking trails are so pervasive throughout the county, the Great Allegheny Passage, whitewater and calm water rafting from Point Marion to Ohiopyle to the Youghiogheny and Casselman Rivers. Yoga and cycling tours are on the uptick in 2019.”

Nemanic noted visitors from cities and compact communities enjoy the “canopy of green and lushness they don’t have in their working environment and living at home.”

People also continue to take trips to visit attractions that feature history, culture and culinary experiences.

“It’s trending more where people are out in the field picking strawberries or blueberries so they are experiencing where something grows and then enjoying a dining experience at night,” said Nemanic, noting chefs are embracing this concept so they are able to transfer local foods to the dinner experience.

Nemanic explained “People want more hands with experiences that visitors can see, feel and taste. That’s leading them to seek cooking classes and wine tastings that are available in the Laurel Highlands.

Previous trends still relevant to the area include Dream to Reality, in which people are making trips to places they have longed dreamed of visiting.

“I truly feel this will always remain on an individual’s list whether it’s visiting the Grand Canyon or Fallingwater or whitewater rafting or the Great Allegheny Passage,” said Nemanic. “Everybody has boxes they want to check whether the experience is individual, or with a friend or as part of a family. I think this will always be part of the equation.”