

Legislators Hope to Boost Tourism

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RICHMOND – In the old days, it might have been tobacco or coal. Now, legislators are turning to a different industry – tourism – to energize the state's economy.

Tourism is considered a "clean industry": It provides jobs and tax dollars that are key to maintaining Virginia's quality of life. But tourism funding has been cut in recent years. That's why several organizations have developed plans to boost tourism and draw more visitors to Virginia's state parks, museums, battlefields, wineries and other attractions.

The General Assembly's Tourism Caucus, consisting of several senators and delegates, gathered last week to discuss how to increase tourism.

Alisa Bailey, president of the Virginia Tourism Corp., opened the meeting by praising Gov. Bob McDonnell.

"This administration has been very supportive of tourism. They clearly understand that tourism is going to have a return," Bailey said.

Virginia museums have big plans to bring tourists to the state.

Cheryl Jackson, executive director of the Virginia Sesquicentennial Commemoration of the American Civil War, announced plans for a Civil War exhibit to be hosted in a Virginia museum for one year, starting in 2011.

After that year, the exhibit would be split in two and loaded onto tractor-trailers. They would travel throughout Virginia, then the East Coast and eventually the entire country. Jackson indicated she might seek a license to drive one of the trucks.

Besides attracting tourists from other states, Virginia tourism officials want Virginia residents to enjoy the commonwealth's attractions. They hope Virginians will take in-state "stay-cations" instead of out-of-state vacations.

Most tourists to Virginia are between 18 and 44 years old. This group spends 22 percent more per trip and 36 percent more per year than other age groups. Virginia plans to target its tourism advertisements to that demographic.

Charlie Bryan, president emeritus of the Virginia Historical Society, said that for every \$1 the state spends on tourism, it earns \$5. He is calling for advertisements to bring people interested in Civil War history to Virginia.

Bryan said that Tennessee is already advertising its connection to the war and that it's time for Virginia to do the same.

Jim Cheng, Virginia's secretary of commerce and trade, serves as an example of how Virginia tourism works.

Born in Taiwan, Cheng grew up in several states. While living in Rochester, N.Y., his family came to Virginia for a vacation, visiting Chincoteague and Virginia Beach. A few years later, Cheng's family moved to Virginia Beach.

Cheng's wife, Jeanette, is in the entertainment business, so his family supports the efforts of McDonnell and actress Sissy Spacek to bring the film industry to Virginia. Spacek visited the General Assembly last week to share her view that "it's time for Virginia to get a piece of the pie."

Delegate Mark Keam, D-Vienna, is a member of the Tourism Caucus. He said getting more movies shot in Virginia is not a frivolous idea.

"A lot of folks on both sides of the aisles tend to snicker about that. They think that's not the core function of the government, and we should be talking about health care, education, public safety, and why are we talking about movies and such?" Keam said.

"As legislators and leaders of this commonwealth, we need to take this seriously ... This is about dollars, this is about money, this is about economy ... Frankly, this is about bringing jobs here."