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Florida House subcommittee keeps bill alive to stop funding for tourism marketing

House Speaker tagged by Gov. Rick Scott as promoting bad bill



People visit with one another in the chamber before the hearing on Wednesday (Feb. 8). *Photo by Carol McQueen*

By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 9, 2017 at 7:37 p.m.

TALLAHASSEE -- Ten of the 15 members of the Florida House of Representatives' Careers and Competition Subcommittee voted Wednesday (Feb. 8) to pass a bill, which will now go on to a committee, and that bill seeks to completely do away with VISIT FLORIDA, the state agency that markets tourism in Florida.

Five members of that subcommittee voted as hundreds of people who had asked them to vote -- for a stop to this action that destroys marketing of the whole state as a destination for domestic and international tourists.

This bill also seeks to destroy Enterprise Florida. Enterprise Florida is the official Economic Development Organization for the State of Florida.

Ken Lawson, the president and chief executive officer of VISIT FLORIDA, has been in his post for four weeks now, according to an email he sent to interested parties.

He thanked the people involved in the state's tourism industry for their support.

"Today (Wednesday, Feb. 8), industry representatives from hotels, restaurants, attractions and every other type of tourism business across the state came to Tallahassee to speak up for VISIT FLORIDA," Lawson noted. "You showed up to help and your voice was heard."

While the bill to eliminate public funding for VISIT FLORIDA may have passed from the House Careers and Competition Subcommittee this afternoon, Lawson noted he "could not be prouder of the way the industry has rallied to make a difference."

From here, the bill goes to another Florida House of Representatives committee for debate. VISIT FLORIDA will continue to fight.

VISIT FLORIDA serves a vital role in marketing destinations large and small in every community in Florida. A reduction in public funding would mean the loss of tax revenue and jobs that benefit everyone.

Lawson provided tips for people to use as the public continues to shows its support for marketing the state to tourists.

- Go to TourismWorksForFlorida.org and find out how to contact your senator or

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representative.

- Call or email your legislators to let them know you support VISIT FLORIDA and oppose the bill.

- Tell legislators how you and your business benefit from working with VISIT FLORIDA.

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks, Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt, Levy County Tourist Development Council Director Carol McQueen and Levy County Parks and Recreation Director Matt Weldon are some of the people from Levy County who went to Tallahassee on Wednesday to let their voices be heard on this matter.

On Thursday (Feb. 9), McQueen spoke to *HardisonInk.com*.

There were hundreds of people in the meeting room, she said. There were 160 forms completed by people seeking to speak.

The subcommittee, however, precluded people from speaking if they were part of an organization or a Chamber of Commerce. Only individuals were allowed to speak.

For the rest of the would-be speakers, their names were called and they had a chance to say if they were in opposition of the bill or in support of the bill.

Rep. Halsey Beshears (R-Monticello, Dist. 7) chairs the subcommittee. He picked who the subcommittee heard.

Many of the state's destination marketing organizations, such as the Levy County Tourist Development Council, receive co-op advertising through VISIT FLORIDA.

McQueen said Levy County is among the counties that enjoy an excellent service through VISIT FLORIDA to bring tourists from within the United States and from other countries.

This service has helped Levy County compete in the market for its share of tourists coming to Florida.

"One of the things I would have said if I had an opportunity to speak," McQueen said, "is that a majority of the people in the state do not live near an international airport."

Therefore, the large attractions in Miami, Jacksonville, Tampa and Orlando have "a given" that people are landing there. The rest of the state, and the small business interests all over the remainder of Florida, she said, rely on their ability to attract people.

That marketing of tourist attractions like Devil's Den in Williston has to be strong enough for those possible visitors to travel by car to find these places.

Attractions in Cedar Key, Williston, Fanning Springs, the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge and other areas in Levy County are not next to an international airport. The same is true for tourist attractions in Gilchrist and Dixie counties.

Gov. Rick Scott said Tuesday (Feb. 7) that the Florida House of Representatives' efforts to strip taxpayers' money from economic and tourism development agencies stem from House Speaker Richard Corcoran's (R-Lutz, Dist. 37) political ambitions.

House Speaker Corcoran is seen as wanting to redirect revenue from VISIT FLORIDA, Enterprise Florida and several other programs to other state programs.

Here are some reasons to keep providing public funding to VISIT FLORIDA.

The cost to the State of Florida tax revenue and jobs from just a 5 percent drop in visitors would mean the loss of \$5.5 billion in revenue, \$563 million in taxes and 70,000 jobs.

Two other points resulting from the destruction of VISIT FLORIDA are that it would create an increase Florida's unemployment rate, and it would hurt the 84 percent of travel businesses that are small businesses.

When Colorado lawmakers stopped their state's tourism marketing efforts, that state lost 40 percent of its leisure traveler market. Within three years, tax revenues declined by \$134 million.

In the absence of the state and local taxes generated by tourism, each Florida household would need to pay an additional \$1,535 in taxes to maintain the current level of government services

"If the members of the Florida House of Representatives think that visitors will just keep coming to Florida because Disney, Sea World and Universal market the state, and other tourism

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interests market the state,” McQueen said, “it won’t be enough.

“It hasn’t been enough in the past without VISIT FLORIDA,” McQueen said. “It has not been at a level of marketing to keep us at a level for our market share without VISIT FLORIDA.”

She warns the people of Florida to be aware that Florida is not the only destination for tourists.

“Every state in the nation has people in tourism who are watching Florida and licking their chops,” McQueen said, “in anticipation of all of the revenue their states will glean from grabbing up the tourism market that Florida would be losing.

“Florida will lose,” she said. “And they will gobble it up. And that’s what’s going to happen. These distinguished people in Tallahassee don’t seem to understand that.”

To make it concise, McQueen cut to the chase.

“This is a bad, bad, bad bill,” she said.

McQueen said that the Levy County visitors who went to Tallahassee shared their feelings in regard to that bill with State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) and State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Orange Park, Dist. 5).

Tourism helps Florida and VISIT FLORIDA is a functional marketing tool for the statewide effort.

- Everyone is a winner with tourism marketing because it creates jobs, generates revenue for the government from visitors and grows the tax base.
- The private sector matches public dollars to create marketing programs.
- Voters need to ask their representatives to stop Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas and now Cuba from convincing Florida’s tourists to fly over Florida to their destinations, by keeping VISIT FLORIDA afloat.
- Tourism marketing helps small communities and small businesses provide jobs more than any big corporations.
- Not only do the 1.4 million jobs depend on tourism marketing in Florida, but the state’s whole economy depends on it as well.