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Analysis: Travel industry big business in Mesa County

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Tucker Hart Adams

Phil Castle, The Business Times

More than 5,500 jobs and nearly \$140 million in annual wages can be attributed to tourism in Mesa County, according to the latest analysis of the economic effects of the travel industry.

Those are important numbers in a county that's yet to fully rebound from the recession, said Debbie Kovalik, the department director who oversees the Grand Junction Visitor & Convention Bureau. "Tourism seems to be the silver lining to our economy."

Julie Shafer, chairwoman of the VCB board of directors, put it this way.

"Tourism is a big, clean industry that's vitally important to our economy. It just doesn't get any better than that."

The results of the analysis were presented during an annual meeting of the VCB. Tucker Hart Adams, an economist who conducted similar studies in 1997 and 2004, also conducted the latest study.

Adams said tourism constitutes a basic industry that brings new dollars into an economy — second only to manufacturing in Colorado in that regard and likely just as important in Mesa County.

For the purposes of the analysis, Adams said a tourist is someone who travels more than 50 miles to a destination or spends at least a night away from home regardless of how far they traveled.

The economic effects of tourists are measured in the money they directly spend on accommodations, food and other goods and services. The effects extend further when the businesses with which tourists spend their money in turn buy goods and services. Additional effects are created when employees of businesses that serve the travel industry purchase goods and services, Adams said. "The initial tourist dollar is spent over and over and over again."

Tourism constitutes big business on national, state and local levels, Adams said.

In the United States, the travel industry accounts for more than 8.1 million jobs, \$232 billion in payroll income and \$148 billion in taxes. One out of every nine jobs in the U.S. depends in some way on travel or tourism, making the travel industry the seventh largest private employer.

Colorado welcomed nearly 78 million visitors and direct travel spending topped \$19 billion. This generated more than \$5.5 billion in earnings to 160,000 employees.

What's more, Colorado has become a more popular destination, Adams said. According to the results of one survey, 21 percent of Americans wanted to visit Colorado in 2015, up from 12 percent in 2003 and 9 percent in 1996.

In Mesa County, the results of an e-mail survey of more than 1,100 visitors conducted in 2015 and 2016 offer a look at who comes to the area, why and what they do when they get here, Adams said.

Fully 96 percent of those who responded were from the United States and 45 percent from Colorado.

Most visitors are well-educated, affluent and older, Adams said, with 36 percent of survey respondents identifying themselves as college graduates, 43 percent with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more and 57 percent between the ages of 45 and 65.

Overnight visitors accounted for 71 percent of the respondents. Of those, 25 percent stayed one night and 33 percent two nights. While 44 percent of survey respondents came to Mesa County for vacations, 16 percent were visiting friends or relatives, 11 percent were passing through the area and 8 percent attending events, Adams said.

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During their visit, 70 percent of respondents said they ate in a restaurant; 38 percent said they went shopping; 34 percent said they went to a winery, brewery or distillery; and 28 percent said they went hiking. The Colorado National Monument remains the most popular tourism attraction with 35 percent of respondents reporting they visited there, Adams said.

Outdoor recreation is an increasingly important component of the travel industry in Mesa County, Adams says, including mountain biking, hunting and fishing.

Overall, overnight and day tourists directly account for an estimated 4,836 jobs in Mesa County, Adams said. Considering indirect and induced effects, the total increases to 5,566 jobs.

An estimated \$113 million in annual wages are directly attributable to overnight and day tourists. Including indirect and induced effects, the total rises to nearly \$140 million, Adams said.

Still other contributors to the Mesa County tourist industry include the health care sector and Colorado Mesa University, Adams said. St. Mary's Regional Medical Center estimated that 33 percent of its patients come from outside Mesa County, while Community Hospital estimated that 11 percent of inpatient and 8 percent of outpatient come from outside the county.

CMU reported that almost 63 percent of its students come from outside Mesa County. Moreover, the latest results of a regional economic impact study estimated there were 464,000 visitors who attended various events and activities at CMU during the 2015-2016 fiscal year, about a third of them from outside the region.

The effects of the travel industry in Mesa County also include the availability of jobs that might pay below-average wages, but also offer opportunities and training to workers entering the labor market, Adams said.

Moreover, the travel industry increases the quality of life for Mesa County residents in promoting restaurants, golf courses, cultural events and other amenities, she said. "The quality of life for all of us would decrease without the tourism industry."

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Phil Castle is editor of the Grand Valley Business Times, a twice-monthly business journal published in Grand Junction. Castle brings to his duties nearly 30 years of experience in editorial management positions with Western Colorado newspapers. In addition, his free-lance work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the Washington Post. He holds a bachelor's degree in technical journalism from Colorado State University.

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- May 2014 (80)
- April 2014 (75)
- March 2014 (81)
- February 2014 (70)
- January 2014 (89)
- December 2013 (83)
- November 2013 (81)
- October 2013 (80)
- September 2013 (79)
- August 2013 (84)
- July 2013 (71)
- June 2013 (75)
- May 2013 (78)
- April 2013 (81)
- March 2013 (78)
- February 2013 (83)
- January 2013 (86)
- December 2012 (73)
- November 2012 (78)
- October 2012 (84)
- September 2012 (85)
- August 2012 (91)
- July 2012 (93)
- June 2012 (90)
- May 2012 (83)
- April 2012 (97)
- March 2012 (96)
- February 2012 (85)
- January 2012 (91)
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- June 2011 (116)
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- March 2011 (101)
- February 2011 (98)
- January 2011 (87)

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