

Numbers show: Tourism vital to local economy

Mesa County's tourism industry

By the numbers

5,566 - total direct and indirect jobs created

\$139.9 million - total annual wages and salaries

\$12.8 million - total annual sales tax revenue

\$1.4 million - total lodging tax revenue in 2016

Source: 2016 tourism economic impact study

[By Mike Wiggins](#)

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Mesa County's tourism industry, one of the few bright spots in the local economy, provides more than 5,500 jobs that generate nearly \$140 million in wages and infuses local governments annually with millions more in sales and lodging taxes, according to a new study unveiled Tuesday.

The study, conducted by veteran economist Tucker Hart Adams, didn't contain a lot of surprises for the roughly 150 people who listened to Adams present her findings during the Grand Junction Visitor and Convention Bureau's annual meeting at Two Rivers Convention Center.

But it reinforced the prominent place travelers coming to the Grand Valley to play outdoors and sample wine hold in the economy, a sector local economic development, business and elected leaders have pushed to expand to counterbalance the largely boom-and-bust energy industry.

The study found that the travel industry in Mesa County provides more than 4,800 direct jobs and another 700 indirect jobs, nearly \$140 million in wages and salaries, \$12.8 million in annual sales tax revenue and \$1.4 million in lodging taxes. The \$1.4 million in lodging tax revenue marked a 3.4 percent hike over 2015 and a 13 percent jump over 2014.

Adams said tourism is second only to manufacturing in terms of dollars it brings into the Mesa County economy. She also noted that unlike many industries, tourism is what's known as a "basic" industry — one that brings money from somewhere else into the Grand Valley. Many other industries recirculate money that's already present in the local economy.

“It reinforces the opportunity to bring new money in. It’s huge,” VCB Executive Director Debbie Kovalik said after Adams’ presentation. “When people come to visit, things happen, like they might come back and retire here. Tourism has this halo effect around the economy. It shines the light on so many other opportunities.”

The study was the third one Adams has performed for the VCB, with the other two completed in 1997 and 2004.

Adams said how many travel trends have changed since she conducted the first two analyses. Business travel and leisure travel for shopping to Grand Junction are down, increasingly replaced by telecommuting and online shopping — or as Grand Junction loses some of its footing as a regional shopping destination — while more people are visiting local wineries, distilleries and brew pubs. Colorado National Monument remains the top destination for visitors, with 35 percent of those surveyed saying they planned to visit the monument.

Adams said there are two primary misconceptions about the tourism industry — that it’s devalued because it only provides low-paying jobs, and that mountain bikers and campers don’t spend money.

She said while it’s true that many jobs in the travel sector pay close to minimum wage, they offer important entry-level opportunities to workers who might not otherwise get that chance. And those jobs can lead to better, higher-paying jobs in the industry. She said one of the people she interviewed for the 2016 study started as a busboy and now owns his own travel company.

As for mountain bikers and campers, many of them arrive in town in expensive trailers and ride bikes worth thousands of dollars, she said — an indication they have disposable income to spend.

In an interview after her presentation, Adams said one of the mysteries for local tourism officials to unravel is why more millennials aren’t traveling to Grand Junction. Fewer than a quarter of those surveyed who visited Grand Junction were under the age of 45.

The study relied on a variety of secondary data sources, personal interviews conducted by Adams in November and a series of email interviews conducted with travelers over an 18-month period between March 2015 and September 2016. The study considered anyone who was more than 50 miles from home or spent the night in Mesa County a tourist.

The full study can be found at visitgrandjunction.com.