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Museum visitors support local communities
Time to remind officials of economic impact

By Emily Doolan

Museums serve to educate the public. That much is obvious. But there are other ways that museums benefit local communities that don’t immediately stand out.

I hope you keep this in mind as Museum Advocacy Day arrives next week.

Economically, museum visitors make a big impact. In addition to admission fees and gift shop purchases, museumgoers spend their dollars in the communities surrounding a museum. They stop to gas up their vehicles locally, eat at local restaurants and shop in nearby stores as part of their museum outing. They stay at local hotels, bed-and-breakfasts or campgrounds.

According to data compiled by the Kansas City Convention and Visitor’s Association, visitors to Clay County in 2010 spent $20.1 million at gas stations, $94.5 million at bars and restaurants, $21.7 million on lodging, $79.3 million at our shops and boutiques, and another $66.6 million on recreation activities.

In general, traveler spending was up in 2010 compared to 2009 and was projected to have even greater impact in 2011, though we haven’t seen those figures yet. Tourism spending in Clay County has increased 13 percent overall since 2005.

The vast majority of travelers to Missouri are from other Midwestern states, but our region hosts travelers from across the country and the world. The Jesse James Farm in Kearney sees visitors from all 50 states every year. In 2011, visitors from 46 countries — including Holland, Italy, Kenya, Australia, Russia, Japan and Iraq, just to name a few — toured the home where Jesse James was born and raised. Jesse James is well known in Germany and England. The farm and bank museums in Kearney and Liberty see visitors from both countries.

The Western literary genre has been popular in both countries since the late 1800s, and a popular film genre since the dawn of silent films. Many Europeans love tales of cowboys, Indians and outlaws. Historic interpreter and James Farm archive librarian Liz Murphy’s experience has shown her that, “Jesse James is among the most famous Americans known to foreigners. When they think of Missouri, they think of Mark Twain, Harry Truman and Jess...
James."

The Jesse James Bank Museum in Liberty also welcomes visitors from all 50 states each year and in 2011, visitors from 20 countries came to hear the story of how the bank was robbed on Feb. 13, 1866, "because Jesse is famous for the robberies he committed, not his home life," according to historic interpreter, Michele Poynter.

Visitors to the farm learn mostly about the James family, Frank and Jesse's role in the Civil War, and the 1875 raid on the family home by Pinkerton detectives seeking to arrest the James boys.

Those visitors more interested in Jesse and Frank's exploits as robbers and outlaws enhance their experience by visiting the Bank Museum. The majority of its visitors have either already toured the farm or plan to visit later the same day. As the two sites are part of the same story, visitors typically have both museums on their itineraries.

Staff members of the Jesse James Farm and Museum and the Jesse James Bank Museum are certified tourism ambassadors. The CTA program teaches front-line tourism industry workers about tourist attractions (museums, water parks, restaurants, shopping districts — you name it) in the Kansas City metro area and making recommendations to visitors based on their interests.

"I try to point out all of the restaurants on and around the historic downtown Liberty Square. We're a local business and we're part of this community, so we like to support other local businesses by making our visitors aware of them," Poynter said.

Kearney and Liberty have a lot to offer visitors beyond unique museums — there are also unique shops, restaurants and outdoor attractions.

Museum Advocacy Day, an event headed by the American Association for State and Local History and the American Association of Museums, is Monday and Tuesday, Feb. 27 and 28. Museums and citizens across the nation are encouraged to inform their elected officials of the many benefits of museums. The American Association of Museums website has many resources at www.speakupformuseums.org.

For more information about Clay County Historic Sites and upcoming events, go to www.claycountymo.gov/historic or call 736-8500.

Emily Doolan is assistant superintendent of Clay County Historic Sites.

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