

Southeastern Welcome Center Ready For Tourist Rush

BY DOUG RUTTER

America's starting to feel good about the economy again, which means more families will likely be taking vacations this summer than last.

That's good news as far as Sabrina Hodges is concerned. The Southeastern Welcome Center director would like nothing more than to see more tourists this year than she did in 1992.

Of course, last year wasn't so bad. More than 375,000 people visited the eye-catching welcome center on the U.S. 17 Shallotte bypass in its first year of operation.

"Last year we didn't know what to expect," Hodges said during a recent interview. "This year I've got numbers to compare it to. I think it'll be a good year because people are feeling better about the economy."

In 1992, the center served approximately 377,177 people. The number was based on staff estimates in the early part of the year and an electronic counter that kept track of vehicles starting in June.

The busiest months were June through September when 63,816 vehicles were counted and an estimated 172,093 people stopped at the welcome center. July was the busiest single month with 17,558 cars and 47,707 visitors.

Hodges heads a four-person center staff that is armed with brochures, maps and helpful hints



STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG RUTTER

SOUTHEASTERN WELCOME CENTER visitors often make favorable comments about the building's unusual design.

to ensure travelers reach their destination and have a good time when they arrive.

"Tourism is one of the biggest industries in our county, and I think the welcome center plays a big part in that," Hodges said. "We're a promotional tool for tourism. That's the bottom line."

Hodges said travelers depend heavily on welcome centers and chambers of commerce. "We're a service to the traveling public. I think it's a good image piece for the county."

The center, which opened last February, features a spacious lobby and reception area, visitor and em-

ployee restrooms, a break room and storage area. Upstairs is a conference room and more storage space.

Hodges is convinced of the center's benefit to coastal North Carolina and Brunswick County in particular.

"We have an advantage. We're in Brunswick County and I think the

coastal communities are seeing a lot more traffic because of the center," she said.

"Really, coastal North Carolina is benefiting a lot whether they know it or not. We know because we know where we're sending the people."

In January and February of this year, Hodges said the center served nearly 50,000 visitors.

"We're already seeing an increase in traffic," she reported in early March. "I expect the numbers to be a little better this year, especially with the four-laning of Highway 17."

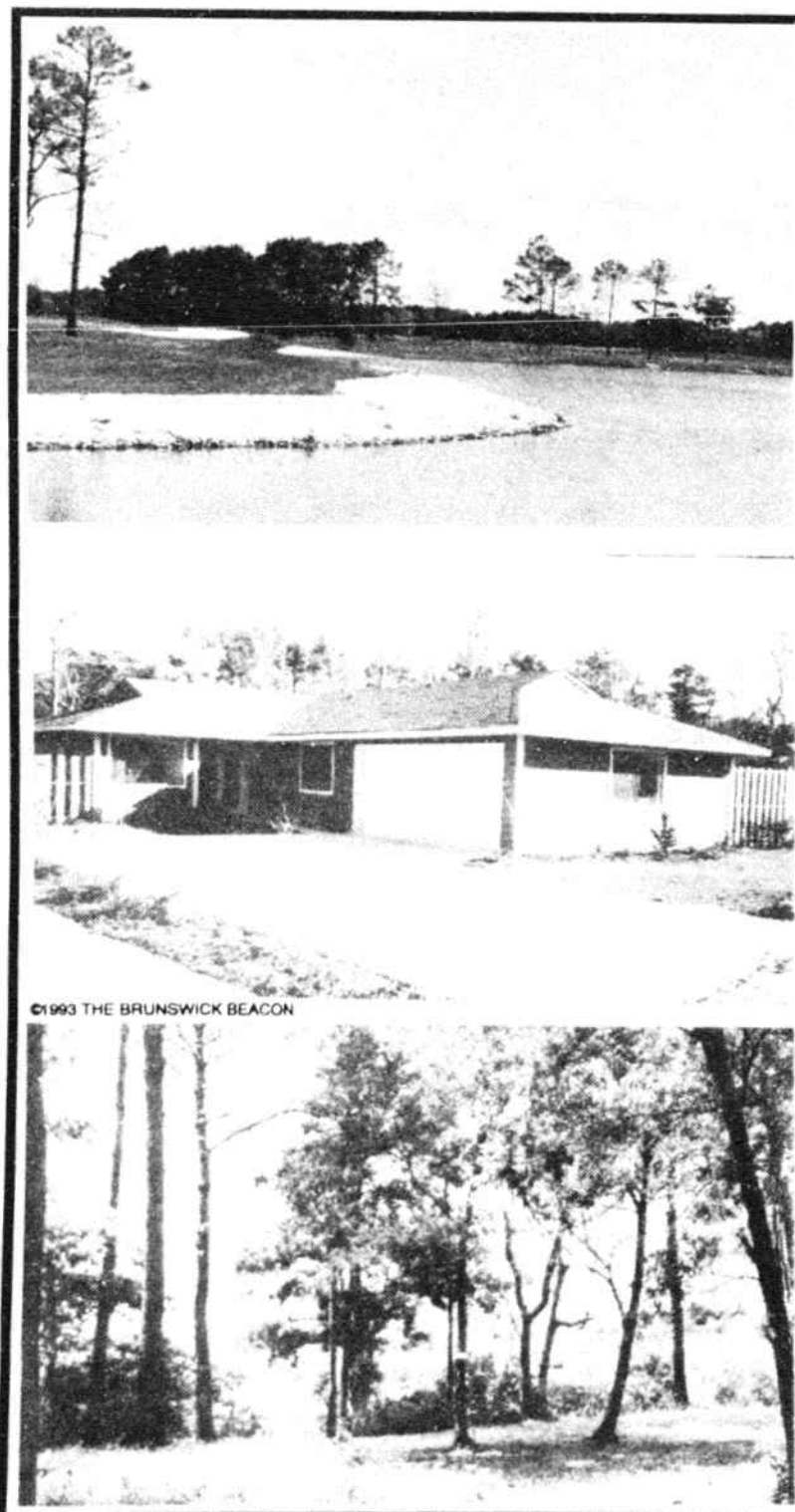
The welcome center staff handed out 257,000 brochures last year promoting different attractions across the state.

"I think that's pretty good for a center that's not on an interstate," Hodges said. Most of the 475 different brochures displayed at the center promote Brunswick, New Hanover and Onslow counties.

Hodges says there's no such thing as an "average visitor" at the center. The staff has seen lots of people from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Virginia, plus many foreign visitors.

"We have visitors of all nationalities. We've probably had somebody from every country visit the welcome center," she said. "We've had a lot of Germans and a lot of Canadians."

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