

# Hang Out The Banners! It's Been That Kind Of Year

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

They're using all the superlatives. "Amazing!" "Fantastic!" and "An absolute boom!" are some of the ways the 1994 tourist season is being described by those who know best.

It seems that visitors to the South Brunswick Islands have come in greater numbers this year, stay longer, and even extend the traditional summer season. The impact is felt by real estate firms, golf courses, gift shops, restaurants, and even the police force. The bottom line is a big cheer for the steady flow of cash into county coffers.

On the front lines of tourism and population growth is the real estate industry. Tripp Sloane, president of Sloane Realty in Ocean Isle Beach, called this a "banner year" for his business.

"We're extremely busy," he said in early August. "We've been 100-percent full for several weeks and are booked solidly for the next few weeks. In July, we had almost 100-percent occupancy every night... the best July ever." As a result, he added, his company has recently hired several more people.

Sloane attributes the bonanza to the improved economy nationwide. "Also, the area has gotten really good press," he added. "Word of mouth has always been great, but this year businesses are doing more promotion and the Chamber of Commerce has done an excellent job."

He also credits golf for an expanded season. "Often Oyster Bay (golf course) was full in March and April and in recent years during September and October, when the beach was not full."

Another seasoned Ocean Isle Beach real estate broker, Debbie Fox, paints a slightly different picture of growth. "There has been more traffic this year, that's for sure," she said, "but that doesn't mean necessarily more vacationers. This whole area's growing and there are more permanent residents. I think heat is bringing more local residents to the beach." She added, "The shoulder seasons (before June, after August) are certainly increasing."

Dean Walters, general manager of Sea Trail Plantation in Sunset Beach, agreed with Sloane's enthusiastic assessment. "We opened this place in 1985 and the visitors who came at first didn't even bring their clubs. It was just family stuff on the beach. Now, they come in the fall, with their clubs, and everybody plays golf."

He said Sea Trail originally provided overflow space. "We never expected to do a booming summer business, but now the courses are full even in the mornings. And the only slow season is December and early January."



HERE'S PROOF that vacationers and resident beach-lovers have flocked to Brunswick beaches. The number photographed here in July of 1993 has escalated, according to business owners and other South Brunswick Islands observers.

Unlike Sloane, Walters attributes increased tourism to natural resources. "This tremendous growth has to do with the quality of our beaches," he said. "We have to give credit to the golden egg...the ocean."

He acknowledges, however, that Brunswick County is blessed with quality golf, as well, with more than 20 courses just in the South Brunswick Islands. "This tremendous rush of business has made a difference at Sea Trail," he said. "We now employ more than 200 people and still need more sales and management people."

Walters noted that a growing population of property owners in this end of the county is another factor in the 1994 boom. "These

people are becoming more active, too," he said.

When the weather or the mood argues against outdoor recreation, most visitors (and many residents) turn to shopping for their fun. One of the many gift shops dotting the landscape is the Potter's Wheel on Holden Beach, enjoying its seventh year in business. Owner Mary Didyoung said an upward climb in customer numbers has happened regularly every year.

"I don't know if we have more tourists in the county this year, but, like in other years, more people found us," she said.

Didyoung is her own accountant and bookkeeper and she commented, "The traffic in the shop got so heavy, I had to move my office



URSULA BROWN takes care of customers at the Potter's Wheel, a Holden Beach gift shop whose business has grown steadily for seven years.

my home. I just couldn't get the work done. Fortunately, I have wonderful employees, so I can walk out and leave it to them."

The expanded tourist season prompted her to make gradual extensions in her shop's schedule. "We opened this year in February, just on weekends," she said, and in March went to seven days a week. Beginning Memorial Day I extended the hours, and on Labor Day will cut them back a little."

One activity common to every visitor and most residents of the South Brunswick Islands is eating out. Until very recently, the restaurant scene consisted primarily of traditional seafood and fast food establishments, but there is a trend toward varied eateries and more of them, particularly since passage of legislation permitting the sale of alcohol.

Betty's Waterfront Restaurant is an "old-timer" among them. In business near Holden Beach since 1983, Betty Varnum's seafood restaurant on the Intracoastal Waterway has recently come under the new management of Mike and Bethanna Macomson. Mike is nearly ecstatic about his first year's business.

"We had projections based on past figures as to how we'd do," he said, "and we've done far better than expected, especially with local people."

Why? "I'm a good cook," laughed Mike.

Other factors, he added, include the proximity to Holden Beach, introduction of a small bar, "The Thirsty Turtle," and a D.J. on the restaurant deck that plays beach music for evening dining.

He offered another reason for the burgeoning tourism. "I think owners of beach cottages are coming down more often than they used

to," he said.

The Macomsons have had to hire more kitchen help and several waitresses, he said, bringing their total employees to 30. Still, he feels the burden of his own responsibilities. "I'm worn out," he laughed.

In making assessments of a growing tourist economy, there is more to consider than the new dollars flowing into the county. There are human factors, such as crime, crowd control and traffic jams.

No one can evaluate this better than law enforcement personnel, who labor long hours, especially during holiday weekends, to keep the multitudes safe and reasonably peaceful.

Police Chief Curtis Pritchard has this job on Ocean Isle Beach. "There were certainly more people on the beach this year than any previous year," he said, "but it was less a problem for the police than last year."

Pritchard, like many others, points to the healthy economy as a motivation for vacationing here. "People have more money to spend," he said, "even those who are out of work and cause trouble stealing or drinking, are better off than before."

Crowded beaches means a challenge for his department. "We're busier, of course, and our job performance must go up, because more people means more complaints." Despite this fact, Pritchard said no additional officers have been hired.

Behind the scenes of "banner years" is the steady, persistent work of marketing agents like the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce. Angela Caison, administrative marketing assistant, said the chamber is "probably" responsible for much of the tourist flow.

"A year ago, we placed an ad in *Southern Living*," she said, "and we've had more than 6,000 inquiries from that; they're still coming in. Inquiries have really gone up this year in general."

Another chamber activity that has borne fruit, according to Caison, is its "travel shows" in regional cities. "We did a travel show at the Raleigh Woman's Show back in the spring and distributed more than 5,000 brochures," she explained.

"Also, we took thousands of plastic bags with our name and phone number on them, and all were gone."

She estimated that calls to her office about the area average 100 per day, rising just before the holidays. "It always helps, too, when newspapers write articles about the South Brunswick Islands," she added. "That has happened with the Atlanta paper and newspapers in Raleigh and Charlotte, too. We get plenty of inquiries after these articles appear."