

TOURISM

Visits bring nearly \$19M

Tally declines in year after Harvey, but CVB stays intent on boosting events and tourism.

By Jacob Dick



Kim Brent / The Enterprise

Sarah Hearn Wells gets a hug from her mother after winning the Service Award last week at the Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau's Hall of Fame ceremony. The award honors contributions to tourism.

Top organizations in 2018 ranked by attendance

SOUTHEAST TEXAS BASEBALL Rooms: 3,174 Attendance: 8,682 Events: 12 Economic impact: \$1,828,710

UNITED STATES FASTPITCH ASSOCIATION Rooms: 2,588 Attendance: 5,670 Events: 5 Economic impact: \$702,000

UNITED STATES TENNIS ASSOCIATION Rooms: 1,512 Attendance: 1,486 Events: 3 Economic impact: \$212,680

STARS OVER TEXAS Rooms: 1,453 Attendance: 5,080 Events: 4 Economic impact: \$292,500

SOUTHERN BLACK SOFTBALL Rooms: 1,400 Attendance: 3,125 Events: 3 Economic impact: \$406,250

AMERICAN COLLEGE DANCE ASSOCIATION Rooms: 600 Attendance: 1,680 Events: 1 Economic impact: \$540,000

STEP-N-STRUTT TRAIL RIDE Rooms: 560 Attendance: 3,500 Events: 1 Economic impact: \$3,000,000

SKILLS USA DISTRICT 7 Rooms: 502 Attendance: 1,800 Events: 1 Economic impact: \$540,000

USA SOFTBALL OF TEXAS Rooms: 462 Attendance: 900 Events: 1 Economic impact: \$117,000.00

BAPTIST MISSIONARY EDUCATION Rooms: 395 Attendance: 495 Events: 1 Economic impact: \$445,500.00

More than \$18.8 million poured into Beaumont last year according to estimates from the Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau, the majority of which was netted through athletic events.

The city hosted 120 events in 2018 with 81 organizations and 74,595 people booking rooms, renting venues and patronizing local businesses. Along with bringing in local tax revenue, those visitors helped support an estimated 3,710 workers in Beaumont.

Most of the past five years had reached \$20 million or better, except in 2015 when only a little over \$18 million was spent by visitors. Events brought \$24 million in 2017, \$20 million in 2016 and \$21.7 million in 2014.

Dean Conwell, executive director of CVB, said there were surprisingly few problems getting groups to return to the city after Tropical Storm Harvey hit in fall of 2017, but events were slightly down from previous years.

“There were less bookings than prior years, but we spent more time promoting our birding and our efforts internally,” Conwell said. “We want to make people happy about living here, and we’ve seen it change a lot over the past couple of years. People that live here are inviting their friends and you can see it by the turnout to our festivals.”

Conwell said the CVB is still focused on “putting heads in beds” to promote economic gains from tourism, but efforts like growing the city’s reputation with bird watchers and creating the first “Restaurant Week” for Beaumont has been a successful way to support local people and businesses.

On Tuesday night, the CVB honored some of the convention planners and organizations that contributed to 2018’s economic impact, including Sarah Wells, owner of the Clifton Steamboat Museum, who received the Service Award for dedication to enhancing tourism in Beaumont.

By the numbers, sports events were the stars of the year with seven out of the nine top-earners of 2018. Baseball and softball tournaments held the top three spots for most visitors in attendance.

Southeast Texas Baseball, a tournament organization that hosted 12 tournaments last year, accounted for over \$1.8 million in economic impact locally, as calculated by the state’s tourism impact formula. Over 8,500 people came to Beaumont during 2018 to attend one of the organization’s tournaments.

Jason Tyner, co-owner of Southeast Texas Baseball Academy with his business partner Morgan Walker, said the organization's relationship with local government and the CVB helped them focus on the ways to grow their tournaments in a competitive market.

"There are facilities in Houston and Louisiana that are equally as nice as Ford Park, so there is always going to be competition," Tyner said. "You have to be running a good event, especially being located in Beaumont. It's more convenient for them to play in Houston, but we offer better prices and try to give a better tournament."

Tyner also gave credit to Walker's expertise as a tournament coordinator.

Tyner said his organization does face a limit on its growth since the fields at Ford Park are only large enough to realistically host event for younger players, but events could continue growing with new age groups if the park decided to expand its fields.

The organization hosted its first tournament of the year of the weekend with 90 teams in attendance.

United States Fastpitch Association and United States Tennis Association were second and third in attendance with economic impacts of around \$700,000 and \$200,000 respectively.

Step-N-Strutt Trail Ride was in the middle of the pack with an attendance of 3,500, but it topped the list of earners with an estimated impact of \$3 million for one event.

The convention business isn't just a boost for Beaumont's economy. Travel expenses netted cities and counties across Texas \$3.8 billion in fiscal year 2017, or 4.5 percent of local tax revenue, according to data from the state Economic Development and Tourism division. Tourism and conventions rank as the state's second largest export industry, supporting one out of every 10 Texas jobs.

As the CVB celebrates the wins of 2018, they are already looking ahead to new achievements. The bureau is already estimating an impact of \$1.7 million for the events booked so far in 2019.

"I think it will be our best year ever," Conwell said. "We are pushing our leisure market for individual tourists and we have a lot more booked for the future. I have an incredible staff that knows the decision makers across the state, and they know how to bring them to Beaumont." jacob.dick@beaumontenterprise.com
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