

Tourism numbers picked up in 2010

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER VENICE GONDOLIER

The recession wasn't enough to keep loyal vacationers home. Fears fanned by the Gulf oil disaster didn't do it either.

Despite historic setbacks, collected bed taxes show more tourists made a trip to Southwest Florida last year than in 2009 — helping thousands of tourist-reliant businesses keep their doors open through hard times.

With season now in full swing, tourism officials said area resorts and restaurants are as busy as ever. They're still working to overcome global misconceptions that Florida beaches have been tainted by the massive spill. But most agree the Suncoast dodged a bullet that could have proven to be the local economy's kill shot.

"The itch is over," said Erin Duggan, spokeswoman for the Sarasota Visitor's Bureau. "Things are definitely starting to look up. Some of our resorts are coming off the best few months they have had in years. Everyone is sold out."

Sarasota reported a total of \$9.74 million in collected tourist development taxes last calendar year. Because the county increased its levy by half a percent in May, the numbers aren't comparable with the year before

Charlotte's tourist development taxes rose from \$2.06 million in 2009 to \$2.08 million in collections last year, according to county records.

Tourist development taxes, or bed taxes, are a local levy placed on all short-term room stays. They're the most common figure local governments use to track visitation trends.

Charlotte spends its 5 percent tax to fund the tourism department and pay off debt at the Charlotte Sports Park. In Sarasota, the county's 4.5 percent fee is directed to arts programs, beach renourishment and stadium renovations, among other projects.

Although last year's numbers don't seem impressive, area hotels were projecting huge losses, given the circumstances.

"We did a lot better than we expected," said Danny Ali, general manager of Sleep Inn and Suites in Port Charlotte. "When people heard about the oil spill, they thought the whole state was covered, but once the word got out that we didn't have oil on our beaches, they decided to come down. ... People are staying longer, spending more money, and creating more taxes."

Ali acknowledged that when British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded April 20, the entire hospitality industry broke into a state of panic. As the spill grew larger and larger, so did local fears.

The initial fallout fueled declines in hotel occupancy across the state, adding another challenge to summer's slow season. Tourism officials said the

biggest hit came with European visitors who were unfamiliar with the state's geography.

Repeat vacationers picked up most of the slack. Frigid conditions in the Northeast also drove more tourists down later in the year.

An estimated 82.6 million visitors came to Florida in 2010, a 2.1 percent increase over the year before, ending a two-year skid, according to figures released this week by Visit Florida, the state's tourism marketing organization.

"The biggest thing for us is the weather. When it starts getting nice out, we start getting a lot of trips," said Jack Pearson, owner of the Englewood Bait House and Captain Jack's Charter Fishing. "Things are starting to pick up. There's boats all over the place out there, just like it should be."

To combat the mid-year losses, Visit Florida launched a multimillion marketing campaign to highlight the state through TV, print and social media advertising. Local tourism departments also bolstered their marketing efforts. Many hotels even lowered rates or crafted special offers to lure out-of-towners.

Stakeholders said those efforts have been largely successful, resulting in a 59 percent hotel occupancy in Sarasota alone last year, with a \$130.44 average daily rate. Charlotte doesn't track those statistics.

"We're inching up month by month," said Roger Heber, general manager of the Warm Mineral Springs Motel in North Port. "Right now, the oil spill is hardly on anybody's mind, but the economy is still a big factor."

Southwest Florida is amid its annual peak season, which typically runs from Thanksgiving to Easter. Uncertainty surrounding a sputtering economy still leaves lingering questions about the industry's future when seasonal sales begin slowing come summer.

For now, tourism officials are just crossing their fingers another calamity like the oil spill doesn't sour their plans for a strong recovery.

"The misperception of the oil spill and the economy did hurt some tourism businesses," said Jennifer Huber, spokeswoman for the Charlotte Harbor Visitor & Convention Bureau. "Now there's a lot more optimism out there."