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# LAKESHORE TOURISM

## *packs economic punch*

By Karen Gentry | MiBiz  
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WEST MICHIGAN - Tourism packs an economic punch on the lakeshore with outside dollars generating income, jobs and adding wealth to the area.

Every \$1 million in tourism revenue generates about 20 jobs compared to just 10 jobs for \$1 million in manufacturing, according to Paul Isely, associate professor of economics at **Grand Valley State University**.

"This is very powerful money that comes into the area and is spent in the area," Isely told *MiBiz*. "Most resources spent that you're using to support tourism are from the area versus manufacturing where some of the parts are made elsewhere and shipped in."

For Muskegon, Ottawa and Allegan counties, workers employed in accommodations or



Isely

entertainment represent approximately 2 percent of the total employment. Although employment in the tourism sectors is down about 8 percent compared to the start of the national recession in 2007, the percentage drop is considerably better than the 11 percent drop in other industries, Isely said.

He said Ottawa County had a big drop in entertainment employment and Muskegon County a big drop in employment in accommodations. But when added all together, "the drop hasn't been as bad as elsewhere in

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Visitors to Michigan's Adventure can sample a variety of rollercoaster thrills, including the above pictured Thunderhawk. Michigan's Adventure, located minutes north of Muskegon, is the Lakeshore's top manmade tourist attraction.

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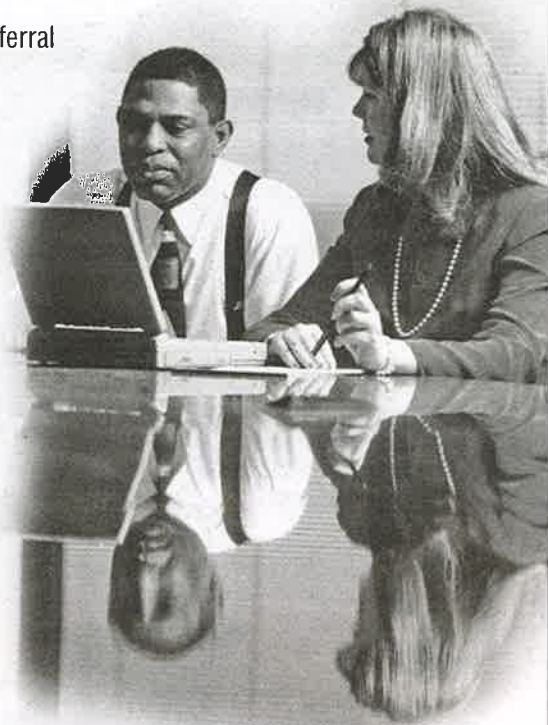
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## TOURISM

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the economy," Isely said.

For the Holland/Grand Haven statistical area, tourism generates about 2.3 percent of total income including leisure, hospitality, accommodations, food services, arts, entertainment and recreation. These tourism industries are just a bit smaller than health and education services, Isely said.

George Erickcek, senior regional analyst for the **W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research**, said a stabilizing economy in West Michigan bodes well for tourism on the lakeshore in 2010.

"As the economy becomes more stable, consumer confidence rises and more people believe they can take a vacation or maybe extend their vacation," Erickcek told *MiBiz*.



Erickcek

According to statistics compiled by the Upjohn Institute, Muskegon County has 384 establishments employing 7,116 people while Ottawa County has 444 establishments employing 8,328. Erickcek noted that although many workers are employed in accommodations, food service and leisure and hospitality, wages in the third quarter peak are low. Weekly wages from July through September average \$237 in Muskegon and \$238 in Ottawa.

Continued environmental remediation will help boost Muskegon County, Isely said. He noted the Muskegon/Norton Shores statistical area is doing better for its size compared to the Holland/Grand Haven statistical area, despite perceptions. The Holland/Grand Haven area generated \$214 million in goods and services in leisure and hospitality, while the Muskegon/Norton Shores area generated \$175 million — although its total gross domestic product is about half of Holland/Grand Haven.

"That particular set of cities (Muskegon/Norton Shores) generates half the income of Holland/Grand Haven but produces 81 percent of value in leisure and hospitality. They're actually doing better for their size," Isely said.

He noted employment in entertainment and accommodations in Ottawa County amounts to 1.9 percent of total employment whereas employment in the same areas in Muskegon County represents 4.3 percent of total employment.

### Holland

Tourism leaders are cautiously optimistic in Holland for 2010, according to **Holland Area Convention & Visitors Bureau** Executive Director Sally Laukitis. With occupancy rates for the Holland area's 1,464 hotel rooms flat last year, the Holland CVB budgeted down a bit for the first time in 15 years. The CVB expects approximately \$370,000 from the 2-percent in-room assessments.

"We just don't know about the economy and would rather err on the side of caution," Laukitis told *MiBiz*.

She is encouraged by the number of new businesses in downtown Holland including the **Thistle Gallery**, **Newb's**



Laukitis

**Jewelers, The Seasoned Home**, a vinegar and olive oil specialty shop and plans for a new **Crane's Pie Pantry Restaurant**.

The Holland CVB leverages its advertising dollars by partnering

with **Travel Michigan** and others such as the **Ottawa County Parks and Recreation**, **Michigan State University Cooperative Extension** and the **Grand Haven Convention & Visitors Bureau**. As part of the **Michigan Beachtowns** promotion with the state, a \$10,000 investment brings in \$180,000 worth of advertising. Holland is also entering into a joint promotion with Amtrak and MITrain.

### Grand Haven

Marci Cisneros, executive director of the **Grand Haven Area Convention & Visitors Bureau**, said the economic impact of tourism in the Grand Haven area is estimated at \$36 million for 2010. The CVB estimates 1.3 million visitors this year based on projected state park visits, numbers from the Coast Guard Festival and estimated assessment dollars.

"That visitor dollar rolls over six times within the community so it has a great



Cisneros

potential to impact the direct business and employees of that business and their family members," Cisneros told *MiBiz*. "It really is an economic engine for our area."

The Grand Haven CVB is funded by room tax assessments from 18 properties and 656 rooms. Cisneros said the CVB has a relatively modest advertising budget of \$55,000 per year.

"We're very creative in how we spend our travel budget. We do a lot with travel writers and work closely with Travel Michigan and the Pure Michigan campaign," Cisneros said.

Grand Haven will be a part of Michigan Beachtown's "West Michigan Pike" promotion, a heritage route best known as U.S. 31 from New Buffalo to Ludington, celebrating auto travel in the area going back to the early 1900s.

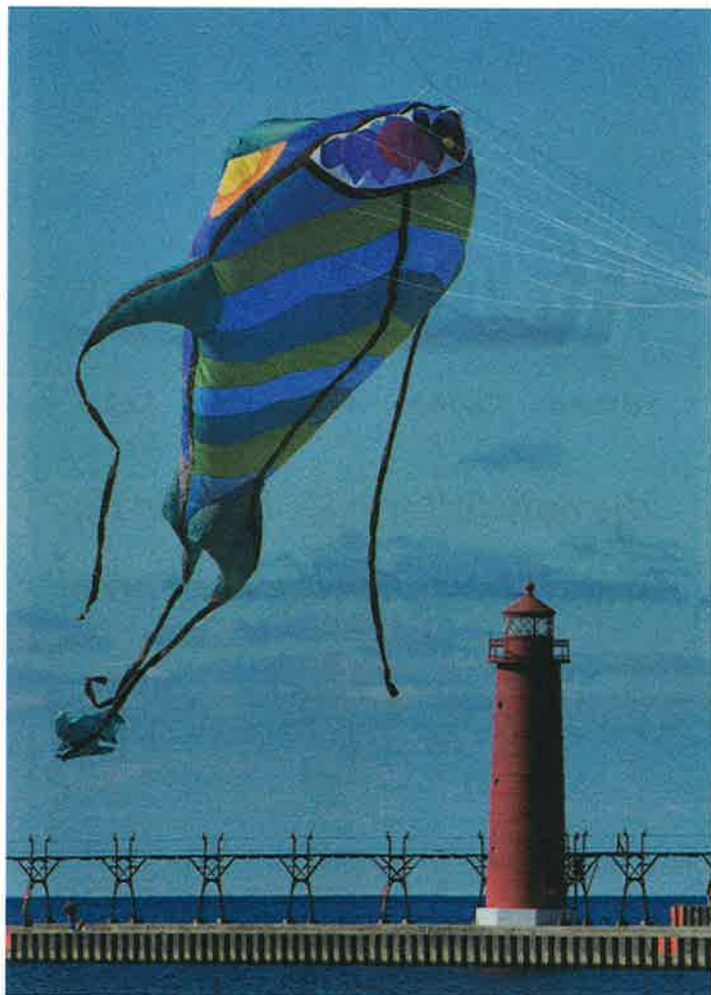
"We're excited about being more attractive to the heritage and cultural travelers, which is a desirable market," Cisneros said.

### Muskegon

The **Muskegon County Convention & Visitors Bureau** also leverages its \$140,000 marketing budget with partnerships available through Travel Michigan, according to Jill Emery, executive director of the organization.

"We are a proud member of Beachtowns — this is a great way for us to get a good 'bang for our buck' and tackle some markets we couldn't afford to have a strong presence in by ourselves," Emery told *MiBiz*.

During the warm weather months, Muskegon has about 2,000 overnight rooms including some cottages. Emery



*Residents and tourists alike storm Lake Michigan's magnificent beaches all summer long ... in spite of an occasional shark ... er, kite sighting off the Grand Haven State Park beach.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GRAND HAVEN/SPRING LAKE VISITORS BUREAU

said occupancy rates for rooms have been strong thus far in 2010. This year, Muskegon County is the host community for the Michigan State USBC Men's Bowling Tournament and has hosted many groups including a regional Lions group, the statewide Optimist convention and the Michigan Port Collaborative Spring Summit among others.

### Further ashore

Communities inland from the lakeshore have to work harder to create a niche and attract travelers. **Zeeland Chamber of Commerce** President Ann Query said Zeeland is the "other Dutch community," with a different feel compared to Saugatuck or Holland. She touts Zeeland's walkable downtown with its



*Crosslake ferry service from Muskegon to Milwaukee is quick and fun on the state-of-the-art Lake Express.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAKE EXPRESS

gift and specialty shops and *Zummerfest*, a Zeeland version of *Summerfest*. Events and activities such as the Pumpkin Fest, community picnics and a farmers market draw people to Zeeland.

**Hudsonville Chamber of Commerce** Executive Director Laurie Van Haitsma, said it is challenging for Hudsonville to compete with lakeshore communities. Special retail promotions have helped, as has a new alcohol initiative in which *Vitales* in downtown Hudsonville and *Family Fare* now sell alcohol.

Hudsonville business leaders have also been pleased with the completion of M-6 with Hudsonville the first entrance of the new east-west highway.

"It's another tool we can use for economic development," Van Haitsma told *MiBiz*.

Tourism is one of four primary industries in Coopersville, according to **Coopersville Chamber of Commerce** Executive Director Cindy Timmerman. Coopersville draws visitors to its farm and historical museums and Del Shannon Memorial, and festivals such as the *Outhouse 500* in February that attracts more than 100,000, and special activities including quilting shows and twice-monthly jam nights of country and gospel music. Coopersville even conducts tours of the landfill.

"We had to make a negative into a positive. We were green before green was cool. We started putting school tours together," said Timmerman, noting she has worked to fight the negative perception of the nearby landfill. **MiBiz**