

Retirement Tourism

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An authority on retirement tourism told a group of Elizabeth City citizens and leaders they should consider marketing to attract upwardly mobile, affluent and educated tourists as future residents.

Patrick Mason said his research and Internet feedback indicate that those most interested in relocating to the Carolinas are from the snow states of the Midwest and the Northeast. Mason said other prospects include those who flocked to Florida but who no longer find the rapid growth of the Sunshine State to their liking.

Mason is co-founder of the Center for Carolina Living in Columbia, S.C. He outlined his research during a presentation to the Albemarle Area Committee of 100 on Wednesday at Monteros restaurant.

Mason said Elizabeth City is No. 20 on a Top 20 list of most preferred cities and towns in North Carolina, based on surveys at Mason's Web site, [CarolinaLiving.com](http://CarolinaLiving.com). The top 10 are Charlotte, Raleigh, Asheville, Wilmington, Durham, Chapel Hill, Cary, Greensboro, New Bern and Greenville. Edenton ranks 14th.

The ranking, Mason suggests, puts Elizabeth City in an enviable position to turn current visitors into future residents.

Mason said North and South Carolina combined spend \$27 million annually on tourism promotion, attracting a total of 65.3 million visitors with an impact of \$40.6 billion. The two states list nearly 568,000 tourism-related jobs, with a payroll of nearly \$13 billion.

He emphasized the need to permanently attract what he calls the "turbo tourists" who are returning on vacation and who are motivated to relocate.

"The turbo effect comes in when they start to invite all their friends," he said.

Mason said 14 percent of turbo tourists have indicated in surveys that they will start a business. And once they move, he said, they will spend 83 percent of their visitor vacation dollars within state lines.

Mason said Florida boomed because of being a vacation destination, but many people who chose to make Florida their permanent home grew to dislike the storms, along with the congestion caused by too many visitors and other retirees.

He drew chuckles when he said, "Walk into a Piggly Wiggly (supermarket) in St. Petersburg. It's a little eerie. There's a lot of blue hair."

Another problem with Florida, he said, is the state, which has no income tax, attracted millionaires, but also attracted retirees who have ended up on the Medicaid rolls.

“I think it’s important at the outset that we agree that none of your tactics will do anything to lower the quality of life for your individual existing residents. They are your No. 1 priority,” he said.

Additionally, Mason said, Elizabeth City needs to be aware of the 76 million graying baby boomers as prospects. He said 26 percent of them have said they will move upon retiring. Many baby boomers, he added, want to stay in the work force, meaning they will work part time or start a business.

He said about 465,000 men, women and children are already moving to the Carolinas annually.

“So, why are they coming here?” he said.

Results of a University of North Carolina-Asheville survey of retirees in the western part of the state, Mason said, indicate they want to live in the mountains because of the scenic beauty, climate, recreation, cultural amenities and modest taxes.

He said one attribute of the Elizabeth City area that would be attractive to potential news residents is “your scenic beauty.” “Maintain it. Make it look cool,” he said.

Mason noted other statistics showing the only two places in the Carolinas with a higher than national average costs of living are the Outer Banks and Hilton Head, S.C.

“Is somebody moving to the Outer Banks worried about the cost of living? Probably not. Is somebody going to Hilton Head worried about the cost of living? No,” he said.

He said that many cities outside the Carolinas have a cost of living higher than national average. Those who leave the big cities of the Midwest and the northeast to move to a place in North Carolina, “just got a paycheck, a real nice paycheck” in savings after moving, he said.

“You need to talk about that. Pencil that out for them,” he said. Mason said the Carolinas face strong competitors from Florida, the Texas Gulf Coast, Arizona, Mississippi and Alabama.

Mississippi and Alabama are attractive to retirees because both states have a homestead exemption, which eases the property tax burden on senior citizens, and because both states have low taxes overall.

Also, Mason said Alabama benefits from the Retirement Systems of Alabama. Alabama’s public employees pension fund made major investments in world-class golf courses and resort hotels.

Those attending Wednesday’s meeting discussed what needs to be done next. They included more advertising and promoting of Elizabeth City, as well as surveying residents, newcomers and visitors. Albemarle Economic Development Director Wayne Harris will come up with a priority list and go from there.

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