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## **New Hanover 2nd in N.C. coast tourism**

Last year New Hanover County brought in more tourism-related revenue than all other coastal counties with the exception of the Outer Banks' Dare County.

The N.C. Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development reports 2004 tourism revenues were up 5 percent over 2003 numbers for the county, which remains in eighth place for tourism expenditures when compared with all the state's 100 counties.

Connie Nelson, communication and public relations director for the Cape Fear Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau, said the numbers for this season won't be available until later this fall.

The good news for tourism in Southeastern North Carolina, she said, is that despite rising gas prices, people are still traveling. This year, though, visitors are opting for lower prices and choosing value over brand loyalty.

Hotels and inns are offering package deals that are popular with visitors, Ms. Nelson said.

This spring, representatives from some Lower Cape Fear area sites entered into a joint marketing effort. More than a dozen area attractions including Airlie Gardens, Battleship North Carolina, museums and historic venues offer a passport that provides a discount on the price of admission.

This year public school students will start back later in the month than in the past. The new school schedule will extend the tourist season, but the monetary effect won't be known until October or November, Ms. Nelson said. And, she added, the bureau wouldn't have a true benchmark to look at until it has culled data from two to three years.

The extended season is "brand new and visitors will have to get used to the fact that this is going to stick," she said.

In Brunswick County, 2004 tourism revenue showed a 15.1-percent hike, making it No. 1 in the state in growth, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. The county ranked 10th in the state in tourism expenditures.

Rep. Bonner Stiller, R-Brunswick, and Sen. Scott Thomas, D-Carteret, Craven and Pamilico, co-chair the N.C. tourism caucus. Mr. Stiller said tourists spent more than \$313 million in Brunswick County in 2004.

Tourists go to Brunswick County for golf, the beach, fishing and eating seafood, he said.

"If we don't shape ourselves up in dealing with the ocean – our biggest drawing card" – the tourism industry will be negatively affected, Mr. Stiller said.

