



Case: Reviving Wilmington, NC and Outer Banks' Tourism Economy after the Impact of Multiple Hurricanes in 1999¹

COMMUNITY PROFILE

The Cape Fear coastal area of North Carolina includes Wilmington, Carolina Beach, Kure Beach, Fort Fisher, and Wrightsville Beach. The city of Wilmington has a population of around 100,000 with about 347,000 in the metropolitan statistical area. The Cape Fear coast boasts one of the largest recreational fishing fleets north of Florida, 31 miles of beaches, and a 230-block historic district. Tourism is a significant industry here, accounting for \$390 million in annual economic impact and about 5,200 jobs at a total payroll of \$92 million. The primary tourism market is in-state, although a significant portion comes from around the region along the Interstate 95 corridor.

DISASTER AND IMPACT ON CAPE FEAR COAST

In 1999, three hurricanes hit the Cape Fear coast within three months: Hurricane Dennis, a Category 2, on August 30; Hurricane Floyd, a Category 2, on September 16; and Hurricane Irene, a Category 1, on October 17. The quick succession of these storms intensified flooding conditions, as fresh downpours arrived before previous flooding could dissipate. Wilmington, located on the Cape Fear River basin, was spared the worst of the flooding, although the Cape Fear islands did close for a few days. The most devastated areas were the inland areas as well as the Outer Banks, a string of barrier islands 100 miles north of the Cape Fear coast.

TOURISM RECOVERY EFFORTS

Organizing for Effective Marketing Coordination

The Wilmington/Cape Fear Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) pursued a collaborative marketing strategy by partnering with both local and state organizations, such as the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development, Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, City of Wilmington, New Hanover County, and the local board of realtors. The chamber and county leadership had already organized a task force to strategize how to revitalize its business and tourism sectors. The CVB ensured that regional economic recovery

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stakeholders worked in concert to both strategize and implement marketing efforts related to tourism.

Prioritizing an “Open for Business” Media Campaign

The CVB and its travel partners spent the next six to nine months campaigning to restore tourist confidence in the region. The CVB utilized its contingency fund set aside for crisis response. Press releases were issued to the Associated Press, *USA Today*, Southeast Tourism Society, and other TV, print, and radio channels in the area. The initial message was: “We’re Open: It’s Business-As-Usual on North Carolina’s Cape Fear Coast.” The releases emphasized upcoming fishing tournaments, arts festivals, and other major events. They also included facts about the community’s disaster preparedness efforts and status as a FEMA-designated Project Impact community. A key to success is to emphasize positive messages and tourist opportunities, such as regional attractions, that are open, as well as any progress of recovery, and disaster-preparedness and resiliency messages.

The CVB soon launched a comprehensive public relations campaign. Ads were placed in print media and television, one portraying shots of a couple walking down the same beach before and after the hurricane. Monthly press releases were coordinated for the rest of the fiscal year. Normal scheduled advertising proceeded in *USA Today* and other news sources, and recovery editorials were submitted to local, statewide, regional, and national publications. The State Division of Tourism secured public service spots from the North Carolina Association of Broadcasters, North Carolina Press Association, and other news sources to spread the “We’re Open” message. The CVB and its partners also identified guest spots on state and regional morning TV shows, submitted story ideas to national cable and non-cable networks, and financed an NYC Media Blitz.

The CVB also pursued marketing strategies hinged on partnering with private organizations, including “advertorials” (editorial advertisements) paid for by local hotels, attractions, and restaurants; making written copy for postcards available for local businesses to send to their customers; and offering to provide written vacation articles to large corporations for inclusion in their employee newsletters.

Revising and Updating Marketing Messages

The initial message, “We’re Open,” was switched to “Better than Ever: The Cape Fear Coast,” a few months thereafter. The CVB endorsed “Better than Ever” on its website, in media kits, to various publications, and also sent goody bags to state visitor centers with free offers from the Cape Fear Coast hospitality industry.

The CVB worked to clarify inaccurate perceptions propagated by the media. National media portrayed flooding some 50 to 100 miles inland (where devastation was heaviest) and reported the pictures as “eastern North Carolina,” although damage to the Cape Fear coast was much

less. Also, headlines of “Beaches Closed” circulated while beaches were open (even though some areas were temporarily closed off to swimming). In response to these inaccuracies, CVB staff developed a map of the North Carolina coast to show relative distances between the Cape Fear Coast and affected areas. The map was sent to the media along with a joint “media crisis statement” issued with the New Hanover County Tourism Development Authority to urge media to report accurately and specifically, so tourists would not be needlessly deterred.

Following the 1999 storms, the CVB created a crisis plan that would be updated annually. The plan included messaging, databases, and duties to carry out. By the next summer, negative perceptions had improved, but then the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Floyd brought about a flood of devastation footage once again.

SUMMARY

The media continue to occasionally reference Hurricane Floyd, especially on anniversary dates and when severe weather surfaces on the Cape Fear coast. At the same time, leadership in the Greater Wilmington area has realized it can effectively correct false rumors and misperceptions that spread through local, state, and national media. Disaster preparedness and setting aside emergency funds for disaster-prone areas place the community in a better position to quickly respond to a disaster crisis.