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Area counties see boost in tourism

Mecklenburg, Cabarrus and Union help drive '07 boost for all of N.C.; rise is largest since '95.

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RALEIGH Mecklenburg, Cabarrus and Union counties enjoyed some of the largest tourist traffic increases in the state last year and helped drive a 7.4 percent rise in tourism statewide, state officials announced Tuesday.

It's the largest increase since the state began collecting such data in 1995.

Mecklenburg, which led all counties in total tourism revenue, watched its tally of visitors go up 9.5 percent. Union saw a 12.2 percent jump, and Cabarrus' numbers were up 12.1 percent.

Tourism statewide brought in \$17.1 billion. The figures, though, cover 2007, and some early figures for this year show the economic slump has taken a toll. Those figures include more than the conventional definition of tourism, including, for example, business travel and visitors from a neighboring county.

"Tourism is a key economic driver, particularly for several of our rural and urban counties," Gov. Mike Easley said in a prepared statement, "and plays a critical role in adding new jobs to our economy and supports our other economic development efforts."

The data for last year comes from an annual study commissioned by the state Division of Tourism and compiled by the Travel Industry Association using sales figures, tax revenue and employment numbers.

This year, however, a hotel industry service that monitors that business shows a 4.2percent decline in bookings, but a slight increase in revenue per room. The state's hotels are renting fewer rooms but making a little bit more money.

"We're seeing an impact on the number of people coming into the state but overall spending remains high," said Lynn Minges, executive director of the state's Division of Tourism.

In the figures from 2007, Mecklenburg generated \$3.4billion in tourism dollars. Wake County came in second with \$1.5 billion.



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