

Collier targets wellness tourism cash

Web page promotes spas, restaurants, beaches, fun

Laura Layden

Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

For about a year, a task force has quietly worked behind the scenes to find ways to grow Collier County's share of wellness tourism.

Now the group is ready to help promote the county as a wellness destination with a web page and a slogan: "Be Well in Paradise," based on the county's branding as Florida's Paradise Coast.

The web page to promote wellness in Collier County can be found on the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention and Visitors Bureau's website at paradisecoast.com/wellness.

It's where dozens of local providers are listed, and information on offerings,

events and initiatives — from hotels and restaurants to spas and tour operators — can be found in one place.

There are hopes of capturing a bigger slice of what's expected to become a more than \$800 billion industry within two years.

The value of wellness tourism — which puts health at the center of the travel experience — was estimated at \$573 billion in 2015. It's expected to balloon to \$808 billion by 2020, according to

the Global Wellness Institute.

The Wellness Tourism Visionary Task Force formed almost a year ago in Collier County after Peggy Sealfon, a Naples-based internationally recognized speaker, author and personal development coach, talked about the skyrocketing growth of wellness tourism worldwide at a Collier County Lodging & Tourism Alliance meeting.

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Yoga is practiced at the JW Marriott Marco Island Beach Resort.

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Tourism

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Sealfon



DeBenedetto

That was enough to pique the interest of Debi DeBenedetto, the group sales and marketing manager for the county's tourism bureau, who sat in the audience listening.

The two women wasted no time creating the task force, which quickly found support from others, including many of the area's largest hoteliers. The volunteer group has more than 45 members and meets monthly.

With the help of the task force, there are hopes of "getting ahead of the game" in wellness tourism, DeBenedetto said.

One way to do that, she said, is to encourage hotels and other area businesses to create packages and experiences that appeal to the growing market — and to educate them on how they can benefit from jumping on the bandwagon if they haven't already.

"It definitely appeals to the millennials," DeBenedetto said. "But it also appeals to the boomer market."

The county has a "terrific foundation" to grow the segment "quite quickly," Sealfon said.

When it comes to wellness, the destination already has much to offer, from its luxury spas and healthy restaurants and specialty markets to its miles of beaches and natural wonders such as the Everglades and Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.

Collier County and the region as a whole are working to become a Blue Zones Community.

The Blue Zones project was introduced to Southwest Florida in 2015, based on the travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share healthy lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times best-seller about the nine principles of longevity.

The NCH Healthcare System sponsored the Blue Zones initiative in Southwest Florida.

More than 140 businesses, government agencies, nonprofit organizations and homeowners groups have earned Blue Zones recognition or approval by adopting practices supported by the wellness initiative.

The newer wellness tourism task force is about fostering more collaboration and cooperation among wellness providers to attract wellness travelers.

"The wellness traveler spends about 130 percent of what the average traveler spends," Sealfon said. "So it would really be an economic boost to our community."

Marco Perry, general manager of La Playa Beach & Golf Resort in North Na-

ples, said that within a year of his arrival at the hotel in 2015, he started to see the value of targeting the wellness tourism market after learning about the area's top overall well-being ranking in a Gallup-Sharecare survey. The Naples area has kept the No. 1 ranking for three years in a row.

LaPlaya is working to become Blue Zones-certified. The resort has added to its wellness-oriented offerings and created a wellness-focused package, which gets revised regularly. The current package includes: a backpack with a yoga mat, one hour with a personal trainer, a 50-minute therapeutic stone massage, bike rental with map, and an in-room aromatherapy diffuser with a choice of essential oils.

Perry started encouraging the county's tourism bureau to do more to promote the area as a wellness destination months before the task force formed, so he was eager to join the new group. He said now there's more energy and positive momentum building to get Naples on the map as a popular wellness destination.

There's an opportunity for the Naples-Marco Island-Everglades area to become the primary wellness destination in Florida, as no other area has really claimed it, Perry said.

"We have the opportunity to beat everyone to the punch in Florida," he said.

The task force plans to host its own community events to spread its message and share its mission — and to continue to gain more support from community leaders, including elected officials.

Randy Smith, president of the Collier County Lodging & Tourism Alliance, said the effort makes so much sense.

"We are such a healthy area," he said. "When you think of a healthy destination, Naples, Florida, has got to be one of the top healthy destinations there can be."

As part of the local effort, Sealfon has joined the Colorado-based Wellness Tourism Association. Since the global association launched in January, it has signed up more than 40 members worldwide, offering them networking, educational and marketing opportunities.

The formation of the association is recognition of just how important of a market wellness tourism has become, said Anne Dimon, a co-founder and president of the nonprofit organization.

One of the association's first orders of business was to create a glossary to define the basic terms used in the sector.

"We no longer call it a niche," Dimon said. "It's a sector. It's very large and it's growing."

One of the association's next goals will be to educate its members on better ways to reach their target audience.

"A lot of people think that wellness travel is still about the spa," Dimon said. "But now it's more about food, fitness and nature. Time in nature."