

Time to See Arkansas First (Joe David Rice Commentary)

5/19/03

By Joe David Rice, Arkansas Business

What a year we've had: economic uncertainty, continued threats of terrorism, a war, rising gasoline prices and then the Columbia space shuttle tragedy. Here in Arkansas, we're also facing the additional challenges of stagnant state revenues coupled with the need to bring the public school funding formula into judicial compliance.

At the same time, we're feeling pretty optimistic about Arkansas' tourism industry. Exciting new products are coming on line almost monthly, and several major developments — such as the Clinton Presidential Center and Park and Heifer's Global Village — promise national and international exposure. New hotels, major convention center expansions, state park developments and ongoing improvement projects for our interstate highways also give us cause for encouragement.

The much anticipated Shoppes at North Hills development will be the state's first upscale, lifestyle-entertainment, open-air shopping center, located in North Little Rock. The Shoppes will encompass 866,000 SF, or approximately 20 acres under one roof, with parking for 4,900 cars. Along with a 70-acre wetland park conservation area, one of the anchor tenants of the development will include the state's first Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World retail store.

This project will bring 600 construction jobs and 1,700 permanent jobs in the retail sector to the greater Little Rock community. The development is expected to be complete in spring 2005 with Phase I completion scheduled for fall 2004.

Tourism is one of the three biggest industries in the state of Arkansas. It directly employs more than 57,000 Arkansans and 27,500 indirectly, through jobs that are dependent on the travel industry and travel-related employment. Those workers received almost \$866 million in wages and salaries last year.

Tourism dollars benefit the whole state. During 2002, those dollars added up to \$3.9 billion spent, up from 2001's \$3.8 billion, directly by 19.9 million visitors. Of that \$3.9 billion, state taxes benefited by \$220 million and local taxes by \$81 million. For the tourism business, 2002 was a rebuilding year. However, we will use the latest travel

intelligence and the most up-to-date marketing methods to enable growth to continue.

The program to replace many of Arkansas' aging tourist information centers is going well, thanks to funding from the governor's portion of the General Improvement Fund (20 percent) and Federal Transportation Enhancement programs (80 percent). Facilities are receiving some much-needed upgrades as they continue to serve as our state's official welcome mats for travelers.

Arkansas still represents an incredibly rich getaway for the modern world. Our clear-as-glass rivers and lakes, misty mountains, moss-draped cypress swamps and music that covers the land like a smile all beckon vacationers to relax, recharge and refresh themselves in The Natural State. I'd like to encourage you to spend more time with friends and family and stay closer to home for your vacation this year. Get out and experience the great things our state has to offer.

If you're looking for something to do this summer, look no further. With more than 600,000 acres of lakes, 9,700 miles of streams, museums, mountains and festivals, the recreational opportunities are endless. Play the Arkansas Travel and Win game, and visit "must see" destinations throughout the state to win great prizes, including an Aloha pontoon boat valued at more than \$27,000.

Yes, our world has changed. Arkansas has seen its share of changes as well. Fortunately, we've progressed as a tourist destination without compromising a breathtaking landscape. We appreciate those who understand tourism's economic value and work every day to preserve our state's history, culture and scenic beauty, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for all Arkansans. We invite you to walk outside and take a good look around — See Arkansas First.

(Joe David Rice is tourism director for the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism.)