

Meet and greet

North Carolina and its neighbors are popular destinations for corporate events. The communities that host them welcome the economic boost.



Andrew Schmidt has a saying: You never know who's in a crowd. The executive director of Greenville-Pitt County Convention and Visitors Bureau says one person may have the power to create a positive effect on the local economy, whether scheduling an event, relocating a company or starting a business. That's why his group emphasizes service and venue when scheduling corporate events. They are an important component of Greenville's overall economic health, he says, outside and inside the meeting-room walls. "It is estimated that approximately one-third of the business that our meeting-and-events hotels and venues host is from the corporate market."

From the coast to the mountains, North Carolina hosts corporate meetings and events for companies representing a variety of industries each year. It's big business. According to a 2014 study by Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Travel Association, sales at tourism-related businesses grew 4.8% in North Carolina in 2014, when the state's tourism industry directly employed almost 296,000 people. Loren Gold, executive vice president of the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau, says 14.4 million visitors spend \$2.2 billion in Raleigh and Wake County each year, which supports more than 24,400 jobs and generates more than \$219 million in state and local tax revenue. That money impacts a community's economy in several ways, says Jennifer Johnson, president of Raleigh-based The Johnson Meetings Group, which helps businesses plan events.

First are the direct effects, such as spending for venue space, food and lodging. Johnson recalls an instance when she chose to hold a client's event at The LeGrand Center in Shelby. She chose the convention center because she wanted to give back to Cleveland County, which has struggled economically. She says her client was excited to help the community, too. "I like to be able to support these areas and expose people to the local resources these communities have to offer," Johnson says. "Exposure can draw in future business and create financial stability."

Johnson hires local catering companies when possible, for example, and encourages clients to visit local businesses. "When people have dinner off-site, fill up their gas tanks before they leave or shop around the local stores, they bring a lot of revenue to an area in just the few days that they are there." The benefits don't always leave with the attendees. She says if they had an enjoyable experience, they might look to relocate or expand their business in the community.

Corporate events have a \$235 million annual economic impact on Winston-Salem, according to a 2014 study. Many are held at Benton Convention Center, which is undergoing an \$18 million renovation, says Christian Schroeder, director of sales and services at Winston-Salem Convention and Visitors Bureau. The work is expected to be completed in May 2017 and includes adding meeting rooms and technology. City and tourism officials have

said for years that the convention center, which was built in 1969, needed a face-lift to attract more corporate conventions. Schroeder says the renovation will accomplish that and more. It will introduce more people to the city, he says, and that will benefit restaurants, hotels, shops and other local vendors. “We have a unique blend of history, arts, culinary and culture in our vibrant downtown.”

Greenville also is investing in corporate events to help its economy long term. The convention and visitors bureau, along with its hospitality partners, are hosting small board meetings for leaders of various organizations, Schmidt says. This strategy introduces decision-makers to all Greenville offers and gives his staff the chance to explain why they should schedule their next large event in the city.

Communities need to attract meetings in order to create these economic benefits. Each business has its own reasons for choosing an event venue, but Schmidt says accessibility is usually at the top of the list. Greenville’s Convention Center, which anchors the city’s convention district, has 95,000 square feet of meeting space, and it is near three hotels. Free parking and complimentary Wi-Fi are available, too, and there is plenty to do after meeting hours nearby. Attendees are encouraged to explore Greenville’s social and cultural opportunities, including playing a round of golf at one of several courses or sampling beers from local craft brewers.

Southern Pines, Aberdeen and Pinehurst, which is home to Pinehurst Resort and its legendary golf courses, offer quaint backdrops for events. The region was a natural to host the International Association of Golf Tour Operators, which met at the resort in late June, says Karin Toomey, information-technology manager and sales manager at Pinehurst, Southern Pines and Aberdeen Convention and Visitors Bureau.

According to Visit North Carolina, the tourism promotion arm of Cary-based Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina Inc., about 11.1 million day trips were taken to North Carolina in 2014, which was the seventh most in the U.S. Of those, nearly 13% were for business. Schroeder believes Winston-Salem’s convenient location gives many attendees the opportunity to commute to corporate events, regardless of where they live in the state. Greensboro, which is home to several corporate headquarters, including VF Corp. and Honda Aircraft Co., also uses its location to attract corporate events, says Kristin Sanecki, director of sales at O.Henry and Proximity hotels in Greensboro, which are owned by Greensboro-based Quaintance-Weaver Hotels LLC. They host corporate events, including leadership training, university events, sustainability meetings and fundraising galas. “Being centrally located in the state — and centrally located on the East Coast — provides an advantage,” she says. “This makes Greensboro attractive as a gathering place for events that pull from multiple cities and states.”

Wilmington invests in strategies and products that bring events, such as identifying potential clients based on their meetings history. The city’s No. 1 priority is developing relationships with clients, says Connie Nelson, communications and public-relations director for Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau. “The meetings industry is very much a relationship business. People do business with people they know and trust.”

That has helped make Wilmington a popular destination for meetings, especially for trade associations. With beaches, a historic riverfront and walkable downtown, there are many ways visitors can experience the Port City and add to the local economy, Nelson says. “This encourages attendees to bring their spouse and family and make it a vacation.” Over the last three years, the average annual economic impact of corporate events in New Hanover County has been about \$70 million. That doesn’t include groups that booked directly with a hotel or venue. Just prior to the most recent fiscal year ending on June 30, the county was about 20% ahead of that average, she says. “Our hotels are staying full more and more, and we have several new hotels opening, especially in the convention center district. This should keep us pacing ahead for at least the next few years.”



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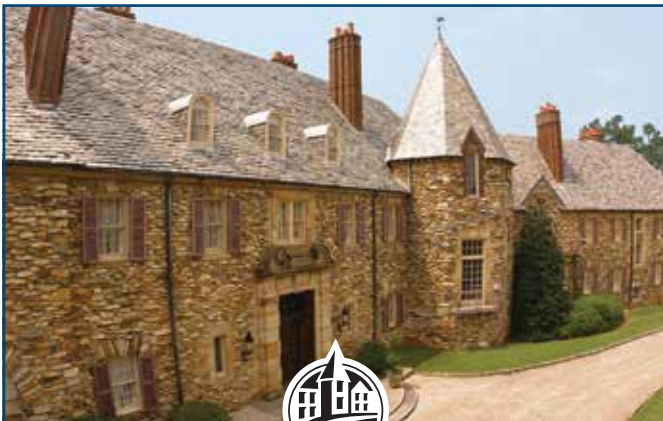


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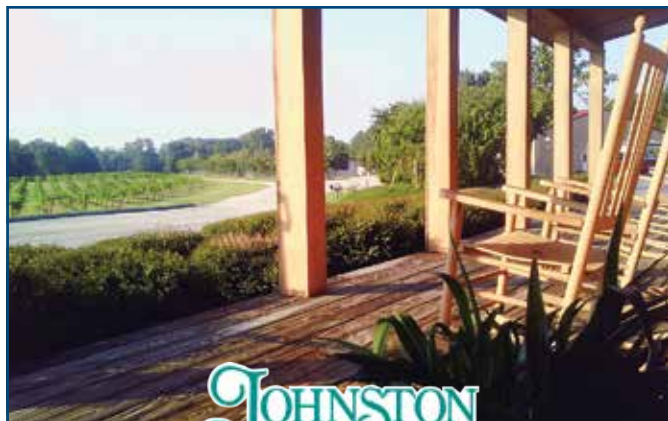
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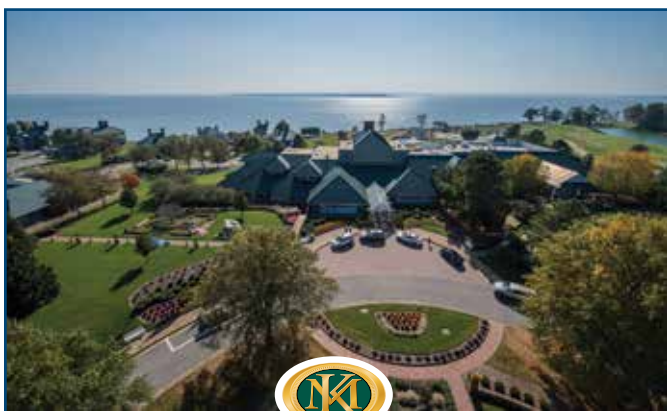


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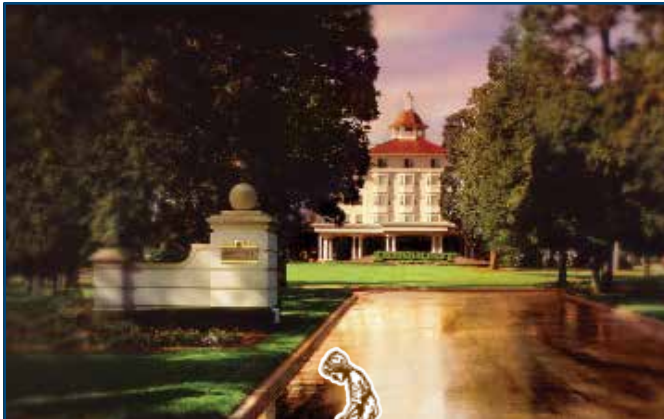
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