



Here in the Lowcountry, tourism is our hero.

That's because the Three Rs – real estate, retirement and related industries – are no longer the Most Valuable Players in our local economy. At least for the time being.

They are still in the game, of course, but they are expected to spend the next few innings either sitting on the bench or moping around in the outfield.

So in this time of tenuous economic recovery, what are we going to do while we're waiting for the Three Rs to get a second wind? I say, play T-Ball! And in this case, the T stands for tourism.

T-Ball is rinky-dink compared to baseball, I know. Likewise, as a profession, tourism isn't particularly glamorous or grownup-sounding. Truthfully, have you ever heard a child say that when they grow up they want to be a ... tour guide?

The problem is that in our current power structure, occupations related to tourism suffer from a lack of status. What evidence do I have? Ask yourself, have you ever read or heard phrases like "powerful real estate developer" or "influential investment banker"? I'd guess you probably have.

But I bet you've never heard these words strung together: "powerful charter bus company operator." Or try this one: "influential hotel linen supplier."

As a matter of fact I actually DO know an influential hotel linen supplier. But the point is that most tourism jobs don't have much cachet. To compound the problem, there's precious little money in tourism work. For many service workers there is no such thing as a "regular job" – a single employment situation for which one person gets one big, solid-citizen paycheck.

You know, eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep, eight hours of other stuff, and, at the end of the day, enough money left over to pay your Rotary Club fines.

Instead, people make do as best they can. But sometimes the only way they have of making do is by doing. Doing many, many jobs.

I call them Sleepy Citizens. They do poorly at work because they have this unfortunate tendency to sleepwalk on the job. And sometimes they just out-and-out SLEEP on the job. Not because they are lazy, but because they're exhausted from working 16-hour days for weeks on end.

So then this question comes up: How is it possible for sleepy-citizen tourism workers to provide good, cheerful service when they are not really quite awake? It can't be because of all the training and professional development they've gotten, because there's not really a lot of that going around in the Lowcountry. (Yes, I know, it makes continuing education sound like a disease.)

It's not for lack of trying. Technical College of the Lowcountry has been evangelizing about training for many years. To their credit, some employers have arranged for their people to take advantage of the opportunities offered by TCL and other education-oriented entities.

These forward-thinking employers are attentive to the training needs of their staff, and they approach the need for professional development opportunities in a thoughtful and strategic way. They take the time to figure out what skills their people need, and then they budget and schedule for it. Easy, right?

But you gotta face it – there are a lotta bosses out there who are just trying to get through

whatever gets thrown at them in the next five minutes. And because a lot of them are sleepy citizens too, they're spending their few lucid waking moments worrying about arriving on time for THEIR night job.

While I'm on this topic – the topic being “sleep deprived people trying to get to work” – I have to point this out: It's not all this joblessness stuff that scares me – it's all this JOBFULNESS.

Think of it this way: jobless people have plenty of time to sleep. And they're not spending much time driving to work. Jobful people, on the other hand, generally do more driving than they do sleeping. Because they've got to do all that driving to get to all those jobs.

The public safety implications are ominous. My theory is that 95% of the Lowcountry's fatal accidents occur when service workers fall asleep at the wheel. I call it DWDO – Driving while Dozing Off. It's like DUI, except instead too much alcohol, there's not enough sleep. And for the record, being “just a little drowsy” is like having “just a little buzz” – you're fooling yourself if you think you're fit to drive.

Anyway, given the difficult and trying life circumstances in which many Lowcountry tourism workers find themselves, I'd have to say they show remarkable grace in serving our visitors while half asleep. Despite the zombie-like pace at which work gets done, most employees in our region keep up a good, positive attitude. For some, it may be the natural sunniness of their dispositions. For others, it may be that they are just too tired to snarl very loudly.

The thing to remember is that these sleepy people – jobful people who don't get enough time sleeping in their own beds – are in fact the bedrock of our tourism economy.

It's a serious issue because, of all the existing industries in the Lowcountry, tourism is in the best position to nudge us toward economic recovery. That's not pure, unadulterated speculation, either. It's messy data-driven speculation from Donald Schunk, a research economist from Coastal Carolina University.

Schunk made a sobering presentation recently before Beaufort County Council. By the time

Schunk peeled his laser pointer away from the screen's last dismal image, the meeting room reeked of suffering and worry.

Speaking of suffering and worry, before you start screaming about how, A) we don't need more tourists, and B) we need to diversify our industry base, please pay attention. Here's a summary of what Schunk did and did not say. DID NOT SAY: Tourism is the only kind of economic development the Lowcountry will ever have. DID SAY: Tourism can help us ride out the next five years. DID NOT SAY: The Lowcountry has to attract more tourists. DID SAY: The Lowcountry has to attract more MONEY from tourism."

And you know what? In order to attract more money, we've got to offer more value.

It is my sincere hope that this is not the end of the conversation on the topic. If tourism is going to help the Lowcountry emerge from this downward spiral, we have to throw everything we've got into becoming a better destination.

I just hope we can stay awake.

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