

If the people won't go to Norfolk's visitor center... the visitor center will come to them

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People aren't coming to visitor centers like they used to, Norfolk tourism officials said they've noticed lately. So Visit Norfolk is headed to them in a decked-out, sky-blue transit van.

The city's convention and visitors bureau has literally rolled out its new mobile visitor center in recent weeks, and it has set up shop at Old Dominion University's homecoming, the Ocean View art show and other events.

Covered in promotional pictures, a few mermaid logos and a license plate that says "Ask Us," the CVB hopes to attract passersby and continue those in-person interactions once confined to visitor centers.

Manuel Devante Garcia, 7, seemed impressed.

"Wow," said the second-grader, looking at a picture of a Virginia Zoo giraffe on the side of the van. He was with an older family friend recently near a Kiwanis event at Town Point Park, where the mobile visitor center was set up.

Talks for the mobile center, which is a 2013 Ford Transit Connect, began about three years ago in response to declining foot traffic at the Ocean View visitor center. That center was intended to be the gateway to South Hampton Roads for those traveling from the Peninsula, but its glory days have gone.

According to Visit Norfolk statistics, 16,299 people stopped by in 2012, compared with 44,542 people in 2001. In 1988, some 99,914 people came.

This past July, officials decided to close an hour early during peak season - Memorial Day through Labor Day - and cut two days from the seven-days-a-week schedule in the off-season.

"People aren't going anymore," said Kristi Sinclair, director of convention and visitor services.

But officials still wanted a variety of ways to reach people, including in-person. After noticing mobile centers being used by other CVBs, including Richmond's, Norfolk officials decided to spend about \$24,000 on the van. The money came from the savings from changes in operating hours, officials said.

The van can be likened to those 6-foot-tall airport shuttle vans, but this one has more features. Its roof carries a retractable awning, which covers information tables and - as was the case at ODU's homecoming - people seeking refuge from the sun.

When its back double doors are open, a rear-facing TV is likely playing a looping video about Norfolk's natural and manmade amenities. The van also has underbody lights, which can create a ground glow of various colors or one color.

"We can do blue for ODU," Sinclair said, "or green for Norfolk State University."

Tourism specialists like to set up a spin-the-wheel game nearby to get people to stop by. They're also licensed to sell items, including mermaid souvenirs and T-shirts that teach the correct pronunciation of Norfolk: "Naw-Fok."

Although the goal is to send it out of market, the van will park at local events for now. That'll be the case for about six months, Sinclair said, and then officials will go to places like Richmond.

"Now we're just doing local festivals to see what works, get all the kinks out," she said. "And then we're going to start going 50 miles out of market."

The mobile center has information about cities including Virginia Beach, even though Visit Norfolk competes with the Beach CVB for some business. One reason behind that is regionalism, as both CVBs are part of the Coastal Virginia Tourism Alliance. Another reason, Sinclair suggested, is visitor convenience.

"We're obviously promoting Norfolk," Sinclair said, "but we're not going to hide our other cities if people want to know about it."

There was a survey published in February that showed that the rate of travelers who visited both Virginia Beach and Norfolk on a trip was higher than the rate of single-city visitation.

At the Kiwanis event - attended by several hundred despite foggy, misty weather - a couple on their honeymoon stopped by the Visit Norfolk van. They were from Maryland and staying in Virginia Beach, Sinclair said, and asked what there was to do in the riverfront city.

"That right there is a prime example of cross-visitation," Sinclair said.

Despite declining numbers at the Ocean View center, people still visit. Diane Ethridge, who's worked at that location for seven years, said elderly people, people who get lost and even military people who want general information about the area stop in.

"Or people want to know: Where do the locals go?" Ethridge said. nibw