

10-2023

Oldham County Tourism Creates Huge Economic Impact as a Destination Spot

By Helen E. McKinney
Freelance Writer

If you ask Kim Hydes, “Oldham County Tourism serves as the county’s driveway and front porch. Often times, our Tourism marketing efforts result in the first time a visitor has heard of Oldham County.” Hydes has been Executive Director of Oldham County Tourism & Conventions for the last 16 years, a period of tremendous development from the ground up that shows no sign of slowing down.

Tourism has breathed new life into the county’s economy in an unprecedented way. In 2022 alone, Tourism brought \$46 million into Oldham County’s local economy and supported over 400 Oldham County jobs, according to a report compiled by Tourism Economics.

In 2021, Oldham County Tourism contributed \$37.97 million to the state’s economy. The constant rise in numbers – close to 10 million in two short years – shows the astronomical efforts made in Tourism development by Hydes through marketing and promoting attractions, events, and partnerships to promote all things Kentucky.

Tourism is essential to Kentucky, being one of the state’s most important and valuable industries. Oldham County is no exception, having brought in \$5.2 million in state and local taxes in 2022.

The increased impact in Oldham County Tourism is right on par with the huge gains state tourism made last year, generating a record \$12.9 billion in total economic impact to the Commonwealth alone. Hydes attended a meeting on August 8th at Lexington’s Crank & Broom Craft Ice Cream where Governor Andy Beshear joined state tourism leaders to celebrate this record-breaking year in which Tourism visitation surpassed pre-pandemic volumes.

An estimated 75.94 million visitors spent \$8.92 billion in Kentucky last year, a growth rate of 16.4 %. Visitors spend their hard earned money in a variety of ways when it comes to Tourism: food and beverage rank at the top, followed by lodging, retail spending, then recreational activities. Oldham County is not lax in any of these areas.

Falling into the Bourbon, Horses & History Region of Kentucky, Oldham County checks every box on the list when it comes to creating the most inclusive destination spot to be found. Hydes is the current chairman of the 15-county Bourbon, Horses & History Region of Kentucky.

“Oldham County has 10+ attractions that can only be found here,” she said. One of them she created herself – Oldham County Farm Tours. These tours have earned Oldham County the title of “Farm Tour Capital of Kentucky”.

From April to November, tours are offered of 15 local farms and gardens, the largest number of educational, hands-on, interactive Farm Tours in the state. In just seven months, 11,000+ guests

visit Oldham County to take these popular tours. People come from all over the U.S. including Tennessee, Michigan, Northern Indiana, Missouri, Ohio and Texas to find what they cannot find anywhere else.

Visitors can enjoy all breeds of horses on five of the farms, from retired race horses to carriage driving horses. Additional tours incorporate bison, sheep, dairy cows, botanical gardens, and nature preserves, as well as organic and sustainable farms.

But Farm Tours are not all that Oldham County has to offer. Garden tours, bourbon experiences, historic Trains on Main, Underground Railroad lore, and a variety of new shops, eateries and museums all contribute to Tourism's development. Such attractions are the driving forces that entice visitors to the county which has become a destination hotspot for authentically-Kentucky experiences.

Yew Dell Botanical Gardens boasts many ONLY's: it is the ONLY botanical garden in Kentucky on the National Historic Register, the ONLY Solar Geothermal Greenhouse with a "Green" Roof in the state; contains the ONLY small-scale castle in Kentucky; has the ONLY Fairy Forest at a botanical garden in Kentucky; boasts the largest collection of hellebores and hostas in the state; and has the ONLY botanical garden with five AIA Awards in Kentucky.

Fueled by Executive Director Dr. Paul Cappiello's passion for horticulture, Yew Dell has transformed into a premier horticultural hub, recognized world-wide for its research and extensive plant collection. Cappiello's knowledge and extensive experience in the field has allowed him to develop the property once owned by Theodore Klein into a botanical garden and public space that can be shared by all.

In promoting such attractions as Yew Dell, Tourism goes beyond Oldham County and the state to market Oldham County's uniqueness and draw people in. "We will be a featured destination in Garden & Gun magazine as part of a featured event called, Garden & Gun Distilled," said Hydes. "We will be partnering with Garden & Gun magazine to host WOMEN OF WHISKEY: AN EPICUREAN CELEBRATION OF BOURBON."

Oldham County Tourism chose Yew Dell Botanical Gardens as the attraction to showcase in Garden & Gun for this project, she said. "Marketing for Garden & Gun Distilled started in September 2023 and will continue through April 2024, ending with a celebration of bourbon that includes the best female chefs and bourbon connoisseurs in the U.S." The Garden & Gun Distilled project is a community collaboration including Oldham County, Lexington, Louisville, Bardstown, and Bullitt County.

Part of Tourism's focus is to create new events such as Women of Whiskey. Yew Dell has also been host to the Old Kentucky Home bike tour for the last two years. This event has drawn many to the county to participate, or simply watch their friends and families take part in the bike tour.

"The Louisville Bicycle Club's OKHT tour is a great partnership," Cappiello said. "I'm a longtime member of LBC and when they were looking for a new host site for the event they

approached me about hosting it at Yew Dell. We were fully in support of the idea because we are always looking for ways for Yew Dell to help support the local community.”

He said the OKHT brings in people from all over the region and “we’re delighted to partner with OC Tourism and LBC to bring more people to the community and to provide area residents with a fun event that celebrates Oldham County.”

For years Yew Dell has hosted the South Oldham Rotary’s Bourbon and Wine experience. Like the OKHT event, this one “shines a bright light on both Yew Dell and the great work South Oldham Rotary does every year to support the community,” he said. And Tourism is right behind them both, promoting each event so that they will be well attended by visitors and locals alike.

“Our goal at Yew Dell is to help everyone find their connection to plants and gardening. Oldham County Tourism plays a crucial role in that introduction (sometimes re-introduction) to Yew Dell that sparks a life-long connection to our community and ultimately local businesses,” said Manda Barger, Yew Dell’s Public Relations & Marketing Manager.

The economic impact of Tourism goes beyond the surface. “Visitor spending creates jobs and helps attract new businesses and services we rely on,” said Hydes. Tourism supported jobs earned laborers \$15.9 million in wages last year.

“Tourism has a major impact on Oldham County,” said Grant Abbott, Chairman of Oldham County Tourism. “Tourism provides a gateway for Oldham County to showcase its diverse character and broad range of attractions. This benefits all aspects of the community by creating opportunities for everyone to experience what makes Oldham County so special.”

Cappiello said, “Oldham County Tourism helps us with every person brought to Oldham County. Every time someone decides to take a leisure or business trip to the area, we have one more opportunity to bring them to the gardens as a visitor, and hopefully, a future member and supporter.”

“New movers and new business owners come to Oldham County as visitors first. Before companies decide to move to Oldham County, they look at our quality of life. Before they open a business, they look at what we have to offer their employees,” Hydes said.

Jenny and Bart Pfanenstiel decided to open Judith M Millinery on Main Street in La Grange a few years ago. A Featured Milliner for the Kentucky Derby, Jenny’s one-of-a-kind creations have been worn by some of the world’s most fashionable people including Former First Lady Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey and Madonna.

Bart Pfanenstiel said, “Judith M is sort of a niche thing.” The business is a stop included with some of the Oldham County Tourism tours which “brings in people not familiar with what we do. It’s about education.”

He said inclusion in these tours “exposes us to a lot of people who have not visited the business. We had a tour in April where even the bus driver remarked how “informative” it was.”

The tours “definitely bring in people who may not even know what a customized hat is,” said Pfanenstiel. “Some people sew, but do not know what we sell and that they can get supplies here. These tours expose people to La Grange and what a friendly town this is. It just brings awareness to everything.”

Oldham County Tourism puts a personal touch on its tours. “Visitors often comment about how friendly Kentucky is in general, and Oldham Countians once they get here. Remarks point out that everyone is so friendly and welcoming and that Kentuckians never know a stranger,” Hydes said.

“Kim does a great job bringing in bus tours and funneling groups to visit Yew Dell,” said Cappiello. “She’s also a great resource for helping us to find other contacts in the tourism world. She’s a hard working collaborator!”

Hydes creates customized packages and programs “to market Oldham County attractions, shops, restaurants and events, on a larger scale, and in turn, that adds to Oldham County’s quality of life.” The more Oldham County Tourism develops in Oldham County, the more it “allows us to draw greater attention to Oldham County in general.”

“When the Tourism office develops a group itinerary, the average person spends \$317 per person in meals and attractions through the Tourism office, excluding their accommodations,” she said. “In October 2022 alone, we did as much in Group Tour Itineraries in one month than in a normal seven month season. It was a ton of work, but brought so much economic impact to Oldham County. Our Oldham County Group Tour Programs are a boon to the local economy that has continued to rise year after year.”

Chairman Abbott said, “not only does Tourism benefit the attractions directly but, also by giving local businesses and residents alike the opportunity and support to reach an expanded market. Everyone benefits.” He cited overnight stays as benefiting hotels, B&B’s, and vacation rentals with increased traffic and visibility as “Oldham County Tourism Programs are designed to encourage multi-day visits.”

Over the last year, Hydes said Tourism was able to apply for ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding “to rebrand Oldham County Tourism and to expand our reach in geographic locations that we would not otherwise be able to afford, but were showing promise in Kentucky overall. We targeted more of northern IN, NY, NJ, MI, TX, and PA. Then increased spending in states we had seen showing up in our research, but were still minor states such as FL, NC and TN.”

In addition to ARPA DMO (Destination Marketing Organization) funds applied for by Oldham County Tourism, “We are participating in an additional \$3.7 million in projects that will showcase Oldham County as part of statewide tourism initiatives. We are developing unique collaborative tourism projects that Kentucky Tourism can use to market Kentucky. Oldham County is part of six collaboration projects that were approved by Kentucky Tourism and will be developed by December 2024.”

Oldham County Tourism has increased its awareness through new branding and participation in travel shows, as evidenced through website traffic. “In comparing our Fiscal Year 2020 website traffic to our Fiscal Year 2023 traffic, we saw an overall increase,” she said. “Specifically, we saw an overall increase of 202.9% users when comparing FY23 to FY20 traffic. Page views increased 409.71% with the average pages per session increasing by 59%. The average time spent on our website increased 78.1% and our bounce rate decreased by 25.4%.”

“Kim has worked incredibly hard at expanding Oldham County’s target market through a multi-faceted marketing program that matches attractions and interested parties in a complete program,” said Chairman Abbott.

For more information contact Kim Hydes, Executive Director of Oldham County KY Tourism & Conventions, at (502) 222-0056 or by email at Director@TourOldham.com, or visit TourOldhamKY.com.

NOTE: Photos provided by Oldham County Tourism & Conventions for media purposes only. Contact Kim Hydes for more Promo Photos.

Photos: Kim Hydes/Oldham County Tourism & Conventions receiving funding for the Garden & Gun magazine collaboration. Kim Hydes, Executive Director of Oldham County Tourism & Conventions.