Lee County’s tourism and hospitality industry could use some good news right now amid the roller-coaster weather conditions, water irregularities and other aberrations this wacky winter.

It got some consolation Thursday at the county Tourist Development Council meeting in Fort Myers: a glowing visitor report for 2015.

But it wasn’t enough to offset hoteliers’ and other business leaders’ unease over negative publicity and public perception.

After intense discussion, the tourism council urged county commissioners and county administration to find a way to fund a quick-turnaround, digital advertising campaign emphasizing the good things the Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel have to offer.

Nothing got firmed up Thursday, however, such a campaign likely would involve bed tax dollars held in reserve. The county and visitor bureau budgets already are set for the fiscal year ending next October. “The pendulum is over on the fear side. And it needs to come back to normal,” said Anita Cereceda, mayor of the town of Fort Myers Beach and a tourism council member, speaking on behalf of pumping up the favorable publicity.

Tourism is a major economic engine in Lee County, accounting for an estimated 1 in 5 jobs. People are seeing news media reports that put the area in an unflattering light, several tourism council members said.

The headline-making bad news has included:

- A rash of unseasonably cold, rainy days.
- Fish kills from red tide, a naturally occurring phenomenon that causes some people breathing difficulty.
- Concerns for estuaries’ health because of massive Lake Okeechobee water releases down the Caloosahatchee River.
- Gov. Rick Scott’s emergency declaration for several counties, including Lee, after people with the Zika virus were identified as being present in those counties. Although the county has the kind of mosquito that could carry the virus, the state department has said the three local Zika patients to date contracted the virus outside Florida.
- Cereceda, who owns two shops on the Beach, said her business is down about 30 percent year-over-year.
- Jeff Webb, partner in Fort Myers’ Hampton Inn & Suites, urged “more positive exposure,” saying that while “January was very good,” February business to date is down about 13 percent, and “March is sketchy right now, because of all the press.”
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