

WRIGHTSVILLE'S NEWSPAPER SINCE MAY 2002

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My Thoughts

by **Pat Bradford**

Thursday, November 12, 2009

Isn't it great this week's weather wasn't with us last weekend?

As I passed the activity in the park last Saturday morning around six, I was grateful for what promised to be a stellar, but chilly day for an iron distance triathlon.

To see so many people out and fully engaged at that hour of the morning was stunning. Even knowing what I did, having seen the fantastic set up the night before, I was shocked to see almost as many people in the park as there are residents of Wrightsville Beach.

In just its second year, slots to compete sold out in less than two weeks. A strong group of area contenders was in the field of 1,400 competitors who hailed from 41 states and 12 different countries that came for the full and half distance iron events. The best time for the second year was had by 30-year-old Bjarne Moller from Odense, Denmark.

Wrightsville's Reggie Barnes, age 48, who sat out last year's race as a result of an unfortunate injury, placed 31.

It's become a popular spectator event. The athletes plus family, support teams plus spectators, have been estimated at 8,000-10,000. We were inundated with people.

It was the first weekend of November and there was not a hotel room to be had in the town. I know because I had friends in from out of town on a little last minute romantic getaway and they could not find a place to stay from the ocean to the river. They ended up in a pricey downtown city b and b. That was all that was available.

Did I mention the date as being the first week in November?

The city of Wilmington is spending a bundle to erect a convention center to draw business conventioners to the city. But it's high time officials wake up and realize the gift we have been given. We are smack in the middle of what is becoming a geographic Mecca for athletic events. And these kinds of athletes and their families will return to drop coins into local merchants' hands for years to come.

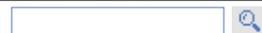
So when I think back to several of the candidates' answers to the question posed at the merchants association election forum, I'm struck by the number of guys who said they didn't really see any economic advantage to the town beside the \$1,457.50 in fees the town collected to stage the event's 2.4 mile (full) and 1.2 mile (half) swim course in Banks Channel, and be the starting point for the 112 mile (full) and 56 mile (half) bike course.

What planet have they been going home to at night, I wonder?

Thousands, literally thousands of people descended on this county this past week, just as they do for the other athletic events, including the YWCA triathlon two months earlier, the numerous surf contests and so on. A brand new Boston-qualifying marathon is scheduled for March 2010, the Wrightsville Marathon. That event coordinator, Wrightsville resident Tom Clifford placed first in the men's half distance event last weekend.

The town and county should do everything possible to roll out the red carpet for these athletic competitors, families and their organizers. These ecologically and socially conscious athletes and their families from around the globe are exactly who we want to be attracting to spend time on our shores. They are our future.

Imagine if the numbers are off and we only had 8,000 people here for this last Beach2Battleship. Just



eAST
at blockade runner
beach resort



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Mark Lawson and
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Support!**

Susan Howell Collins

8,000.

And let's say only 50 percent of them ate breakfast, lunch or dinner in area eateries any one of the two days minimum they were here in the county. That's 4,000-12,000 meals we wouldn't have served otherwise, in all probability. How many of those chose to eat at Causeway is unknown but when I passed by there it was packed as usual.

Redix reported Saturday race related shoppers in the store. Let's say one third of the B2B crowd went shopping for a memento as strangers to an area are apt to do. That's 2,700 possible cash register dings that wouldn't have happened.

Now if only 5 percent of these people rode around, found the area attractive and friendly enough to plan a vacation here, second home or retirement, and stopped by a real estate office for information, that would have equaled as many as 400 potential real estate rentals or sales for the community.

Sure for each event the routes get refined and the traffic snafus decrease. But a little inconvenience a few times a year is greatly outweighed by the positive impact of these very green events.

When I hear elected officials and candidates for office say they are not in favor of these type events because they might inconvenience residents who will then phone them and complain about the noise or traffic, it makes me crazy. When I hear them say there is little to no economic benefit to the town, I know they are crazy.

More good news, if this weather sticks around until the weekend, we'll have an influx of surfers looking for big waves on an otherwise slow weekend. (And the Cucalorus film festival along with the Willie Stargell Celebrity Golf Tournament will inject several hundred people into the mix.) We need to do everything we can to make these ecotourists feel welcome and in a mood to return. And heads up, just two weeks to Flotilla, which was originally started to make the area merchants' cash registers ring in an otherwise dead time.

Imagine that.



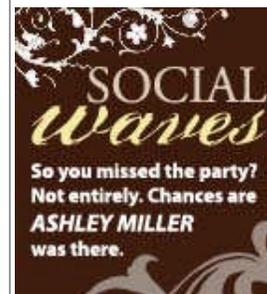
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