



Doris Maricle / American Press

Skip Cortese, of the Louisiana Spirits Bayou Rum Distillery in Lacassine, discusses the importance of travel and tourism in local economic development with Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser on Friday during a facility tour. Last year, the distillery had 35,000 visitors.

Billy Nungesser attends Tourism Awards Luncheon

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The Southwest Louisiana Convention & Visitors Bureau held its annual Partners in Tourism Awards Luncheon on Friday in celebration of National Tourism Week.

Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser, on the last leg of a statewide journey, spoke at the luncheon, highlighting tourism statistics.

Nearly 30 million people visited Louisiana in 2015 and spent \$11.6 billion, generating \$843 million in state tax revenue — “taxes you and I didn’t have to pay,” Nungesser said.

He said a team of tourism officials recently spent a week in Canada promoting Louisiana.

“We’ve got so much to sell and offer, but the thing I learned in Canada, that we all knew, it’s our people,” Nun-

Lt. gov. stops at Bayou Rum

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LACASSINE — Tourism is economic development for rural areas. That is the message elected leaders and tourism officials focused on Friday while meeting with Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser.

Nungesser visited with nearly 30 mayors and other city officials and tourism representatives at Louisiana Spirits Bayou Rum Distillery in Lacassine. Louisiana Spirits President Trey Litel said the idea of Bayou Rum

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gesser said. “It’s our people that have that love and passion for selling (each part of the state).”

About 40 percent of the international visitors who come to Louisiana are Canadian, he said. “They really do love our French heritage, our culture, swamp tours,” he said. “And that’s an incredible amount from one market that we need

to make sure we increase.”

He said New Orleans will host the IPW convention in June, attracting 6,000 delegates from 73 countries.

The Partner of the Year award was presented to volunteers with the Great Acadian Awakening Music Fest, which took place in October. The volunteers were presented with engraved plates.

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grew out of discussions in the duck blinds of Lacassine.

“My brother and I were sitting there talking about why there was no rum in Louisiana when we have all this sugar cane, so we decided right then and there to look into it and here we are about six years later,” Litel said.

The company, started in 2011, produces rum from locally grown sugar cane. The distillery opened its doors for public tours in 2013. Last year, it had 35,000 visitors, Litel said.

“And that’s just people coming off the interstate,” he said. “Tourism is so important to us. We knew from the beginning. That’s what’s fueling our growth.”

He attributes the increase in visitors and market growth to area tourism officials’ work in getting travel writers to “come take notes and write about us.”

“That has driven interest from all these different states,”

he said. Bayou Rum is now available in 20 states.

Lake Arthur Mayor Robbie Bertrand said tourism is important to small towns, which often do not have much to offer in the way of economic development.

“Tourism is big time — the hotels, the restaurants, the Flyway Byway — especially for me being a mayor of a small town,” Bertrand said. “We aren’t on Interstate 10.”

He said tourism is important to Lake Arthur because it is located on a lake and in a scenic location. “We realize it’s our ticket,” he said. “Industry isn’t so much; the obvious thing is tourism.”

Marion Fox, director of the Jeff Davis Parish tourism, economic development and chamber of commerce offices, said tourism is the best driving force for economic development in the parish.

“Economic development is tourism. It’s economic development, but it’s tourism,” she said. “That’s what we are trying to do here: Match up economic development projects with tourism to not only provide quality jobs for our citizens, but to also help provide cultural things for our visitors and citizens to do.”

Nungesser said the distillery and businesses like it make Louisiana special.

“These kind of establishments — people that will take a risk and an idea from a duck blind and make it a business, an attraction and something special for Louisiana,” he said.

“This is what we sell in

Louisiana. Places like this that you don’t see anywhere else.”

Travel and tourism play major roles in economic development for the state, particularly in rural areas, by generating tax revenues and jobs, Nungesser said.

The state needs to focus more on marketing the outdoors and small attractions, along with its music, culture, history, food and drinks, he said.

“We’ve got to get people outside of the big cities to see the beautiful places like this establishment around the state,” he said of the distillery.