



# Keeping Afloat

THE TRRD ACT *keeps economic growth flowing along the Tennessee River*

by KYLE SWENSON

**A**lthough famed for its peace and quiet, Hardin County's Pickwick Lake was nothing but loud and rowdy one weekend this May. Amid boats bulleting across the water and roistering festivities on the shore, thousands of spectators packed the area for the annual Pickwick Challenge, a three-day boat race and festival. Thanks to an improved line-up of popular Formula I and Formula III Champ series racers, the fan-friendly spectacle was expected to draw more than 25,000 visitors, the highest attendance in the event's four-year history.

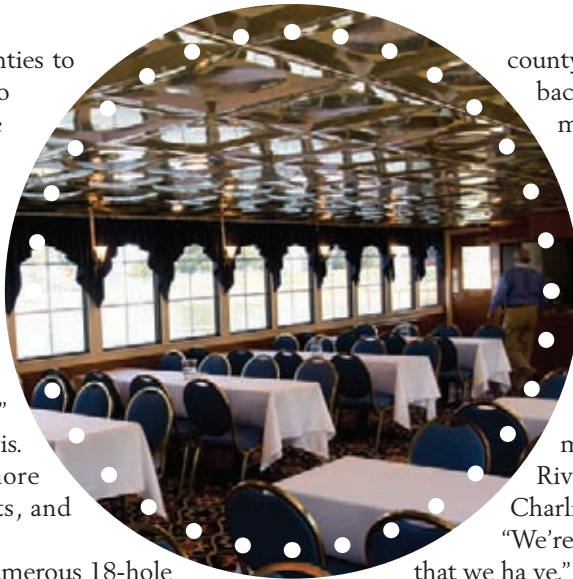
This year's new and improved race is just one example of Hardin's efforts to invigorate local events and draw tourists, all thanks to state legislation that gives the county some financial flexibility. Passed in 2005, the Tennessee River Resort District Act (TRRD) allows eight

distressed West Tennessee counties to retain state tax funds in order to funnel the money back into the tourism trade. For Hardin, the extra funding has been integral in rallying tourists to local attractions, in the process changing attitudes about the area both outside and within county lines.

"This has given us an opportunity to take advantage of," says County Mayor Kevin Davis. "We're going to have to be more aggressive in promoting events, and the act helps us do that."

With the Tennessee River, numerous 18-hole golf courses, Shiloh National Military Park and a rich historic district in the county seat of Savannah, Hardin has always had much to offer weekenders in search of small-town Southern charm. But in years past, without money for marketing or luring outside events, Hardin was left an untapped destination on the state line.

The TRRD Act leaves the region the budgeting room to strategically market itself. With a combination of billboards advertising and direct mailing to outdoor and fishing groups, the region has increased its name recognition. The



county estimates it will receive \$202,000 back from the state in 2008. Half the money goes directly into tourism, while the other half returns to the county's general fund.

County officials have used the additional funding to host and improve larger events such as the Pickwick Challenge. Last summer, Savannah hosted a coast-to-coast car show called The Great Race. The city is also the scene of country music star Darryl Worley's Tennessee River Run, which recently featured the Charlie Daniels Band.

"We're really wanting to focus on the events that we have," says Rachel Baker, Hardin County's tourism director. "Making them bigger and better and supporting them."

County officials say they've already begun to witness the economic impact of the act. Both hotel/motel occupancies and retail sales figures are up significantly, according to Davis. In addition, the increased attention to tourism has affected real estate values along Pickwick Lake.

"After we passed that legislation, the property values on the water went up 5% to 10%," Davis says.

Savannah has also seen an increase in visitor traffic to its

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downtown area, says City Manager Garry Welch. By focusing on smaller weekend events, such as charity fundraisers, car shows and concerts, the city has not only attracted tourists but also has sparked a renewed interest in the downtown area among county residents.



Despite the impact of the legislation apparent in the growing pomp and promotion around local attractions and events, the act's other economic aims have been slower to take hold. Specifically, national chain restaurants and hotels have yet to open within the county—part of the bill's original goal. (Certain chains have shown interest, but no plans have moved forward.)

The true economic impact of the act will build year after year, says Rep. Randy Rinks (D-Savannah), who sponsored the legislation in the Tennessee General Assembly.

"It should only continue to improve and help the area attract more tourism as we go along," he says.

But some in state government believe the incremental improvement is slow-going, and they criticize the legislation because it takes a way from the state's funds. Rinks counters that, in the long run, an increase in tourism means an increase in the money the state receives from sales tax. Despite such a long-term benefit to the state, the Tennessee General Assembly has indicated that no other counties will be able to pass the act.

Within Hardin County, for residents and city officials alike, the act's impact appears to have registered beyond simple economics.

"It probably gave government officials more confidence that they can do things and be seen in West Tennessee as a vibrant community," Welch says. "We've always been deemed as 50 miles from everywhere, and this has sort of put us back on the map."

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