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CENTERPIECE

Visitor Center Opens At Valley Mall

By LAINE GRIFFIN Daily News-Record Jan 8, 2019 Updated Jan 9, 2019



The Harrisonburg Tourism and Visitor Services has opened a second visitor center in the Valley Mall to increase visibility for local businesses and attractions in the city.

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HARRISONBURG — The more tourists, the better.

The Harrisonburg Tourism and Visitor Services opened a second visitor center at the Valley Mall, 1925 E Market St., on Dec. 12 to target the motor coach industry.

The additional center, located between Belk and the Sprint store, is expected to help bring more visibility for Harrisonburg's businesses and attractions to tourists and people passing through the city.

The Hardesty-Higgins House, 212 S. Main St., has been serving as Harrisonburg's only visitor center for nearly 14 years. But Director of Tourism and Visitor Services Brenda Black said visitors don't always stop downtown when passing through the city.

"We've seen significant challenges with the motor coaches because many times they roll in after the Hardesty-Higgins House is closed," Black said. "And sometimes they're coming as a pass-through to New York City or another major city and we don't have enough parking to provide them here at the main tourism center."

The new center is a self-service facility that includes an interactive map on a touch screen, branded kiosks and many brochures and travel information.

Visitors also may call 432-8935 and speak to a certified travel specialist Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

On a weekly basis, around 9,000 visitors stop in Harrisonburg specifically on their way to Massanutten Resort or Shenandoah Valley National Park, Black said.

"We want people passing through to see what Harrisonburg has to offer and make it a point to come back here on vacation," she said. "There is so much we have to offer outside of James Madison University — so many unique shops, restaurants and art galleries, but people need to be exposed to them."

The mall's visitor center will have onsite demonstrations where local businesses can do demonstrations and talk about what their business has to offer.

The Hardesty-Higgins House offers the same amenity, and Black said, if possible, she'd like to see it done at the new visitor center more than once a month.

"Local businesses like coming to do demos and talk about their business because it increases their visibility," she said. "It also gives the mall more foot traffic, which is needed."

The Valley Mall provided the space for the visitors center and paid for the internal and external mall signs. The city paid for the signs on U.S. 33.

The tourism and visitor center spent less than \$30,000 on the project from their roughly annual budget of \$80,000, Black said.

Right now, staff at the Hardesty-Higgins House can track how many people visit the visitor center at the mall.

The touch screen also has a guest book that visitors are encouraged to fill out. Staff retrieve the information on a monthly basis, which tells them where guests are coming from and if marketing strategies are working.

In the next fiscal year, the Harrisonburg Tourism and Visitor Services plan to expand the touch screen to include a portal where people can talk to travel specialists live.

The visitor center will be open during mall hours, Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from 12:30 to 5 p.m.

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