



## **The May Motorcycle Rallies' Last Ride: Are the Rallies Financial Responsible?**

Almost everyone agrees that the May motorcycle rallies have gotten out of hand. Even supporters of the events are cognizant of the problems brought by the mass gathering of motorcyclists for nearly three weeks in May. So far, the supporters of the rallies have referred to their "right" to these events. Whilst one could argue that these events violate the right to "peaceful" assembly, let us consider if these events are financially beneficial to the area.

It is true that these events are revenue generating. Millions of dollars are spent on lodging, food service, and alcohol at establishments that are locally owned. Millions more are spent on goods sold by visiting vendors—many of whom come from out of the area specifically for these events. But does the revenue generated by these events exceed *all* of the associated costs, thus resulting in a net positive for the community?

Tax money from sales tax goes to Columbia to be redistributed throughout the state. The fact is we get less back than we contribute. However, for these three weeks the costs to Horry County and its municipalities increase dramatically. Ten thousand hours of overtime for law enforcement is quite expensive for the taxpayers of Horry County and the cities of Myrtle Beach, North Myrtle Beach, Surfside, etc. After all, property tax not sales tax usually funds public safety.

Supporters argue that these events bring their businesses vital revenue and that some workers count on this for up to 20% of their annual income. But do they consider the negative impact these events have on other local businesses? Many businesses that are not tourism related do not benefit from these events and close for the duration. They actually *lose* revenue due to these events but their tax dollars still fund the extra expenses incurred in an attempt to manage these rallies. Supporters of the rallies would argue that these businesses do not have to close. Yes, that is their choice. However, if your customers are unable to get to you because of traffic or because they have been driven out of town by the rallies, there is really no need to be open. These people, then, either stay home or leave town meaning they are not spending money in local establishments. They are likely spending money in other communities—Charleston, Wilmington, etc. Thus locals, who do not need the substantial extra

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law enforcement required by the rallies but who are bearing a disproportionately higher burden of the cost, are displaced as are their revenues. These are stable revenues that many businesses, such as restaurants and bars, rely upon during the slow season.

Next, consider how many tourists are displaced in May due to these events. Many hoteliers warn paying customers away due to these events. This revenue is also lost to other locations. Were it not for these events families would return during the month of May. These families would spend money, the same as the motorcyclists, with less required expenditures on law enforcement, trash removal, etc (much the same as for the Fourth of July, Labor Day and other holidays). To say that only the bikers can fill hotel rooms during May, as has been indicated by supporters of the rallies, is arrogant and uninformed. These supporters seem to selectively forget that not too long ago Memorial weekend used to be the busiest weekend of the year for tourism. It was the start of the summer for families. It can be that again when May becomes a month for families and has events paying tribute to our men and women serving in uniform.

But beyond the actual measurable dollars and cents, there is a tremendous and immeasurable cost arising from the damage to our reputation stemming from these events. Visitors know to stay away in May. This does not fit well into efforts to remove the stigma of Myrtle Beach being the Redneck Riviera. Further, how do we measure the costs of a human life that is lost to violence during these events? And how about the costs associated with increased violence—robberies, damage to personal property, etc? These are all real costs that no one seems to think about relative to these events.

It seems doubtful that the revenues generated by these events exceed *all* of the associated costs. Thus, there is not a net positive impact for the community. However, in the absence of the motorcycle rallies, other more positive events could eventually take their place. The month of May provides great opportunities for this community to host an event such as a professional golf tournament (LPGA, Senior tour, or PGA), organized and sponsored by area courses, hotels, and businesses. The sizeable crowds drawn to such events would generate substantial income and positive publicity for the community. For example, the 2007 Senior PGA Championship at Kiawah Island had a roughly \$25 million economic impact for South Carolina (according to the College of Charleston Office of Tourism Analysis). Other golf events have had as much or more of an economic impact on

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the communities that play host. Hosting an event such as this in Horry County and Myrtle Beach would serve the Grand Strand well. A professional golf event would be able to fill the hotel rooms vacated by the bikers if the events are ended.

Tax payers in the city of Myrtle Beach are willing to subsidize the cost of ending these events, as is evidenced in the three mils increase in property taxes to be used to find ways to end these events. As yet, the supporters of the rallies and those who profit from them have not indicated a willingness to subsidize the costs associated with managing these events. Nor have they offered any solutions as to how to make these events more bearable. Nor do they seem to sympathize with the residents and business owners who oppose these events. They are interested only in themselves and what works for them with little or no apparent regard for other taxpayers in the community. Residents and opponents of the rallies would undoubtedly be willing to listen to any credible proposals put forth in a gesture of goodwill by the supporters of these rallies. In the absence of a compromise, these events are doomed.

This community does not respond well to threats by rally supporters that we cannot stop them. To the contrary, a concerted effort by local government and business owners will be enough to make the events undesirable for the participants of the rallies. The many options available to help end these events include:

- An elimination of permits for these events during the month of May or a dramatic increase in the cost of vendor permits for the month that would make it economically unfeasible for vendors.
- The use of home rule to pass a helmet law. Though all the bikers have helmets, they are quick to remove them when law does not mandate usage. Though supports say a helmet law would have no impact on the events, they know that such a helmet law would take away a great joy for the bikers.
- Hoteliers can simply refuse to allow motorcycles and trailers on property all year long. Bikers are welcome, but if they do not have a place to park their bikes or



trailers where are they going to stay? Many properties have already instituted this policy with great success.

- As an alternative, hoteliers could charge a parking fee for motorcycles and trailers. A fee of \$500 per bike and trailer per day would go a long way in helping to pay for increased security and law enforcement during these events.
- Law enforcement can institute inconvenient traffic patterns, road closures, and multiple traffic stops, as has been rightly proposed by the Myrtle Beach City Council.
- The city and county can pass even more restrictive noise ordinances and increase the fines associated with any violations.
- Residents should boycott those establishments that cater to the motorcycle rallies' participants. We know which restaurants have "preferential" parking for motorcyclists during these events. There is no preferential parking for locals. Let us remember that during the winter months when these businesses are desperate for our patronage. These businesses will get the message very quickly.
- Consolidate these events into one week in May that does not include Memorial Day. Then, Governor Sanford could declare a state of emergency and call up the National Guard troops to monitor the events and help law enforcement enforce the laws. This sends a powerful signal that abjectly disregarding and disrespecting the law during these events will not be tolerated. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent, and when the jail reaches capacity, the convention center could serve as overflow holding cells guarded by the National Guard.

In the old West, residents of a town would stand together, armed, with their sheriff to turn the rowdy cowhands away from town when their destructive forces were not welcome. Today, a growing majority of the Grand Strand community does not want these rallies to



return. It is time for us to stand with our leaders and law enforcement to take back our town in the month of May.

But banning these events is not to say that the motorcyclists are bad people. Quite to the contrary, many do positive things in the community such as organizing poker runs to raise money for worthwhile causes and honoring our veterans and active military personnel. The residents' patience with hundreds of thousands of bikers gathering in a small area in the month of May has run out. The few good aspects have been totally eclipsed by the rowdy, disrespectful behaviour that has now come to characterize these events, and sadly, the participants of these events have failed to police themselves or keep their friends in check.

In the final analysis, the negative aspects of these events will outweigh the positive aspects, even if measures being taken curtailed or controlled the events. In the absence of these rallies, May could be one of the, if not the, most profitable months for all of the County, the cities, and the residents. There is little doubt that the revenue would be replaced, gradually and over time through efforts of the County, the cities, and private industry working together, and expenses cut tremendously (and immediately) by bidding these events farewell. Let us take May back, improve our image, cut our costs, and transform the month into one where families are willing to return. Over time, our economy will thrive again in May when the bikers have moved on.