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Carolyn Wagner, a Springfield native who now lives in Florida, is owner of one of 240 motor coaches that arrived at the Clark County Fairgrounds this week for the Monaco International rally. The Greater Springfield Convention and Visitor's Bureau estimates the economic impact of the event to reach \$600,000 to \$700,000. Staff photo by Marshall Gorby

By Everdeen Mason

Staff Writer

Springfield — A major motor coach conference in Clark County could generate between \$600,000 to \$700,000 in local tourism revenue.

The Monaco Coaches International Rally is here this week for the third time in 18 years. It brings about 240 coaches and their passengers to the Clark County Fairgrounds to meet and greet before the annual Family Motor Coach Association conference in Indianapolis next week.

For the fairgrounds, the Monaco event yields about \$35,000 in revenue for them, said Allan Hess, executive director.

Group motor coach tours may make up about 10 percent of Clark County's tourism revenue, although some tours come without contacting the Greater Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau, bureau Director Chris Schutte said.

"We work with them pretty closely to give them suggestions for attractions, entertainment and restaurants," he said. "We contact local businesses to generate discounts specific to that group."

Most motor coach groups are smaller than the international rally, Schutte said, and bring one or two coaches or buses with 50 to 100 people. One group of 55 visitors is coming into Springfield

next week. People usually come in for a day or two and have specific stops on the itinerary, such as the Hartman Rock Garden or Westcott House.

"That is a very important market for tourism because they are back to having expendable income," Schutte said. "And (motor coach visitors) like to travel and they like to experience different things. We've been very successful in booking tours."

The visitors bureau attends the Heartland Travel Showcase conference every year, Schutte said, to market the area to different coach tour groups.

The Ohio Travel Association puts on the showcase every year, and books about \$13 million of travel business for the state there, said Melinda Huntley, travel association executive director.

A group called Ohio Has It! markets coach and bus tours for the state in conjunction with the state tourism department. Tiffany Gerber, co-founder of Ohio Has It! and tourism manager of the Tuscarawas County Convention and Visitors Bureau said Ohio is uniquely suited to group travel tourism.

"Each (Ohio) region has at least one, if not several, scenes that lend themselves to a nice, rich itinerary," Gerber said.

The number of bus tours hasn't changed much, Gerber said, but a change has occurred in the demographic.

"We've seen more what we call student travel," she said. "Children traveling as a group through their school for a learning experience or a performance group, like bands and choirs who incorporate performances with a tour."

The attendees of the Monaco Coach rally have been in Springfield since Monday to meet with fellow Monaco coach owners before the big conference next week. Each day vendors have set up at the fairgrounds for guests, and they also leave to view different attractions, shop and eat.

"We're certainly enjoying your area. People are so congenial," said Marilyn Jenkins of Texas, who organized the rally with the visitors bureau.

She said many have been enjoying local restaurants and shopping at the antique malls.

"We targeted (restaurants) who offered discount coupons from the visitors bureau, which was a good idea on their part," Jenkins said. "It got people out there."

The group chose Springfield, Jenkins said, because of its proximity to the Indianapolis rally and for its facilities. She said the fairgrounds has the space for the coaches, an area for seminars and the Champions Center — a large facility with air conditioned dining capabilities.

The fairgrounds and Hess are also nice to work with, Jenkins said.

"He really bent over backwards to get us in after the antique fair that was here over weekend," she said.