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Grady Spann, superintendent of the Ozark Folk Center and an 18-year veteran in the Arkansas State Parks System, encouraged Fort Smith to get its motor running for motorcycle tourism on Friday (Oct. 5).

Spann addressed members of the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce during the First Friday Breakfast at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith (UAFS).

He emphasized the growing sector of motorcycle tourism, "which didn't exist eight years ago."

"We (State Parks) have been working on this market for the last seven years. It's a growing market. I had a visit with the director of Missouri State Parks a few years ago, and he said to me, 'We don't want motorcycles up here.' And I said, 'That's good. We'll take them all.' I don't think he understood what he was giving up by making that statement," Spann said.

What he was giving up, according to Spann, was a significant economic impact for his state. Citing a 2005 University of Arkansas Center for Business and Economic Research study on Bikes, Blues and BBQ in Fayetteville, Spann said bikers there spent "on average, \$87.50 per person," making for a \$35.1 million injection into the state economy.

An August 2012 event -- Mountains, Music and Motorcycles -- in Mountain View, Ark., brought in an economic impact of \$1.3 million, Spann added, in spite of its small-town venue.

"The impact is on lodging, restaurants, fuel stations, small gifts. The other thing I've figured out is that I'll go somewhere on my bike and want to share it with my wife, so I'll come back on a different day with her for a repeat visit."

Part of what makes motorcycle tourism such a lucrative field for business owners is that "bikers today are not what they used to be," Spann said.

"The clientele we see today is different. From 1985 to 2003, the median age for bikers increased from 27 to 41. Bikers from ages 40 to 49 increased from 13% to 27%. Fifty-plus-year-olds, and I'm in that age group now, went from 8% to 25%. That's because bikers are getting older, I

guess," he said.

To business leaders looking for ways to harness the motorcycle market, Spann believes it's important "to welcome them and market to them," something the state has started to do through a print media campaign of \$46,561 annually, "which doesn't sound like a lot of money, but a few years ago, we spent \$0."

To Fort Smith specifically, Spann believes the time is right for a motorcycle show that caters to women bikers, who make up "about 10% of active bikers."

"It's the next big thing, and I'd like to challenge Fort Smith with it. There are no events like this in the nation, and it could be huge. If the city of Fort Smith were to stand up and say, 'You know what, we're going to invite all women bikers from all over the nation to an event that is exclusively for you. We will pamper you. We will take care of you. We will support you and have vendors that cater to your needs' -- there have been some events that have tried to do this -- what was it, Bikes, Babes and Bling?, or something like that? Don't degrade and make it a bikini contest or anything like that. Make it where you respect the fact that they're bikers."

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Spann will travel with an Arkansas exhibit to the Progressive International Motorcycle Show from Nov. 9-11 in Dallas. "There will be 94 exhibitors at that show, and Arkansas will be the only state there promoting tourism. Fort Smith and several other cities within our state will be a part of that."

Event planners estimate there will be 24,000 motorcycle enthusiasts in attendance with median income of \$88,000 per year, Spann said. "It's our first time, so we'll try it and see how it goes."

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