



The region's beach

Storm recovery effort leads to major tourism rebound

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What changes over the past year have most impacted Clearwater, and in what ways?

The first part of the year was very difficult. Recovering quickly from hurricanes Helene and Milton became the top priority. Tourism is central to Clearwater and to Tampa Bay as a whole, and Clearwater Beach is the region's primary beach. About 10,000 people work on the beach alone, and many more depend on the tourism economy throughout the city and region.

We invested about \$85 million in recovery and mobilized our full city workforce of roughly 1,900 employees. A major milestone was reopening ahead of spring training. The Philadelphia Phillies' stadium had been badly damaged, and welcoming their fans by Feb. 15 was essential. Those visitors became trusted eyewitnesses to our recovery. When they shared on social media that Clearwater Beach looked the same as ever, it validated our progress in a way that no official message could.

As a result, we had our strongest tourism year on record — the highest spring hotel occupancy we've seen and a record summer in terms of bed tax collections and occupancy. Some neighboring communities are still recovering today, which underlines how significant it was for Clearwater to lead the county and the region back. The early phase required extraordinary effort, but that work turned a difficult year into one of our most successful.

Clearwater is on the way to becoming an autism-certified city. What is the impact of that?

Clearwater is naturally diverse. Tourism brings people from all over the world, and the city is also home to large employers in manufacturing, technology and other industries. That environment has encouraged us to cultivate a culture of inclusion and hospitality for residents and visitors alike.

Becoming an autism-certified city would be a natural extension of that work. Our goal is to make families

with a member on the autism spectrum feel welcomed and supported when they visit — and that starts with ensuring our own residents experience that support every day.

To achieve that, we are training police officers, firefighters, emergency personnel, nurses, medical providers and others throughout the community. It creates a more informed and empathetic response to the unique challenges individuals with autism may face.

How are you strengthening resilience moving forward?

Our ability to recover quickly from recent hurricanes came down to two major factors. First, we had the capacity to respond. As Tampa Bay's third-largest city, with about 1,900 employees, we were able to invest \$85 million and mobilize a large team to rebuild. Many smaller surrounding communities simply do not have that level of resources.

Second, we benefited tremendously from long-term planning. Over the past 15 years, Clearwater Beach has been rebuilt with higher elevations and stronger, more resilient structures. New hotels and coastal buildings were designed to withstand major storms. That preparedness allowed us to recover far faster than we otherwise could have. That investment in resiliency pays off. We are living proof out here in Clearwater that it does.

But resilience is not a single-city issue. Tampa Bay functions as a unified regional ecosystem. People may live in Clearwater but work in Tampa or St. Petersburg. They may send their children across county lines for school, or travel to hospitals outside their own city. Our tourism economy supports events at Raymond James Stadium and Amalie Arena, and about 85% of our visitors arrive through Tampa International Airport.

That's why we work closely with Tampa and St. Petersburg on shared resilience initiatives. One major focus is wastewater infrastructure. All three cities are making major investments to strengthen wastewater systems and improve water quality in Tampa Bay. ■