

Baltimore Sun - A tale of two cities

Our view: Success of cruise terminal demonstrates how Maryland can take advantage of its economic (and demographic) assets

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Have you heard the one about the competition between Maryland and Virginia over a lucrative employer? One state invested \$36 million of taxpayer money, with modest results. The other invested two-thirds less but is growing by leaps and bounds.

Another victim of Maryland's allegedly poor business climate? Not quite. That sobbing sound you hear is coming from the south, where the three-year-old Half Moone Cruise and Celebration Center in Norfolk is struggling to attract enough cruise ships to justify its cost.

Meanwhile, Baltimore's cruise business has grown from 27 home-ported (meaning originating and ending in Baltimore) cruises in 2008 to 91 this year. Next year, it's expected to expand to 113 cruises serving 240,000 passengers. Norfolk has 11.

Symbolizing the differing fortunes of the two cities is the 2,446-passenger Enchantment of the Seas, with its swimming pools, casino, rock-climbing wall and bungee trampolines. The Royal Caribbean International cruise ship left Norfolk for the last time last weekend. Beginning today, it will be deployed from Baltimore instead.

The Maryland Port Authority's \$13 million South Locust Point cruise terminal has gotten so busy, it's reaching capacity. With just one berth, the terminal can only handle one ship per day. It's no Taj Mahal, but the converted paper warehouse has proved to be a smart investment.

Port officials estimate that cruising has brought in \$91 million for Baltimore's economy, a welcome addition in a time of economic uncertainty. That spending translates into about 500 jobs, ranging from the vendors who sell fuel and other supplies to the cruise lines to those employers involved in ground transportation and terminal operations.

Norfolk's port has a big advantage over Baltimore when it comes to container traffic — unloading in Virginia means cargo ships don't have to travel up the Chesapeake Bay. But Baltimore has a huge edge for cruising. The city is much closer to where millions of potential cruise customers live and more convenient to a major airport and two of the region's busiest interstate highways, I-95 and I-70.

The cruise business may not be as lucrative to the port as cargo, but it's proved so profitable that officials are now studying how they might expand the terminal or add a second location to serve more cruise ships in the future. Most of the growth in cruise traffic has taken place during the last two years, as the port went from a strictly seasonal cruise business to year-round.

That change has made Baltimore a bigger cruise ship home port than fellow East Coast cities Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston, S.C. Only New York and Florida are more popular locations for beginning and ending a cruise.

That Baltimore expects to host nearly a quarter-million cruise passengers next year is another indication that Maryland would be wise to nurture the tourism and hospitality industry. Cruisers book hotel rooms, dine at restaurants, shop and often visit local attractions before and after their journey. Such an opportunity for economic growth in the midst of an economic recession is something business leaders in Virginia's Hampton Roads region can only dream about.