Experts differ on impact of Lake Worth name change

By Kimberly Miller
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Lake Worth —

It inspires thoughts of romance and sunset walks, of a “Where the Boys Are”-style freedom and summertime squeals of joy.

And it’s no wonder a town that has it, wants to flaunt it.

But whether adding the word “beach” to a city’s name, as Lake Worth voters will decide in November, will significantly boost tourism dollars is unclear.

Marketing experts say there is little empirical evidence of an economic uptick when an area’s seaside proximity is publicized. Anecdotally, however, most agree it can help draw visitors, many of whom begin their vacation planning on Google.

“It can succinctly and efficiently communicate something and will bring a lot of positive association,” said Don McEachern, CEO of North Star Destination Strategies, about adding “beach” to a city’s name.

The Nashville-based company, which specializes in community branding, recommended the convention center in the city of Mobile, Ala., change its name to the Mobile Bay Convention and Visitors Bureau in 2002 to capitalize on the waterfront. While difficult to measure, he believes the change elevated the city’s reputation and brought business.

“Our research showed that a lot of people didn’t even realize Mobile was on the coast,” McEachern said. “If there’s a lack of awareness that a community is on the water, putting beach at the end of the name is effective.”

Several cities in Florida have sought to advertise their coastal locations with name changes. Dania Beach added “beach” through a referendum in 1998. A year later, Hallandale became Hallandale Beach.
For Lake Worth, it’s not just a beach thing. Lake Worth Vice Mayor Scott Maxwell said changing the name would help the 7-square-mile city distinguish itself from parts of unincorporated Palm Beach County that have Lake Worth mailing addresses.

In 1992, the city of East Detroit became Eastpointe to separate itself from Detroit. But residents of Detroit, Ore., had fewer problems with the association, voting down a 2010 proposal to change the name to Detroit Lake.

“People will draw their own conclusions on whether it gives us a fresh start, distinguishes us from the surrounding areas or gives us more panache,” said Lake Worth City Manager Michael Bornstein.

There would be little expense, Bornstein said, to change letterhead or business cards. He has an idea for old Lake Worth signs — auction them off.

“If this can become an effort that brings people together, I think it’s awesome,” Bornstein said. “If people want to use it to cause division, then I’m not too keen on it.”

An earlier effort to add “beach” to Lake Worth’s name was quashed in 1990. A Palm Beach Post story from the time said a 20-foot list of petition signatures from residents opposing the change convinced city commissioners to leave Lake Worth alone.

Adding “beach” to the name can be a double-edged sword, said Sarjeev Varki, a marketing management and strategy professor at the University of South Florida.

The word conjures pleasant images and high expectations. If reality doesn’t meet those expectations, it can trigger a “cascade of negativity.”

“People are freaked out. They feel like they’ve been conned,” Varki said.

Peter Ricci, director of Florida Atlantic University’s Hospitality Management Program, experienced that first-hand when he worked at a hotel several miles from the beach in Deerfield Beach.

Some guests chose the hotel specifically because they thought it was at the beach.

“They would challenge us and say, ‘This must be Deerfield and not Deerfield Beach,’” said Ricci, who doesn’t believe a Lake Worth name change will have much of an economic impact. “My honest opinion is that it will do very little for tourism because there are so many places in Florida that already have beach in the name.”

It also could take years for a new name to come naturally to locals.

In 1989, Manchester, Mass. officially became Manchester-by-the-Sea. Town Administrator Wayne Melville said some people may have voted on the name change because they thought it sounded better or to distinguish it from a number of other towns named Manchester.
“By-the-sea is much more romantic sounding,” he said. “And then there were those who said it was just the practical thing to do.”

But almost everyone — all 5,000 or so residents — still just calls it Manchester.

*Staff writer Willie Howard contributed to this story.*