

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Lee VCB to launch booking engine on consumer Web site** *New distribution channel to offer compelling vacation offers*

LEE COUNTY, FL – As part of a broader initiative to proactively foster product development and offer value-oriented vacation experiences, the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau (VCB) will launch a booking engine on its consumer Web site later this year.

“Travelers are seeking value and convenience more than ever before,” said Suya Davenport, VCB executive director, when rolling out the new booking engine today at a tourism industry workshop to detail the initiative. “To compete effectively, we must constantly reinvent our destination and deliver compelling vacation products that differentiate us from alternative experiences. Adding a booking engine to our Web site opens up a new distribution channel to conveniently deliver a variety of vacation offerings from our industry partners.”

Davenport, who said online booking will begin this fall, cited recent research supporting the VCB’s move into online bookings for the destination. A J.D. Power and Associates’ Independent Travel Website Satisfaction Study conducted in 2008 shows that, of the total travel bookings done in the year 2008 globally, close to 70 percent were made online. To date, more than 40 local tourism partners have signed on to participate with the VCB’s booking engine.

Other research indicates consumers still are planning to travel but that they are altering *the way* they travel by shopping for value, trading down in their choices, and shortening the length of their trips – all in an attempt to reduce the cost of travel. And the Internet clearly is a weapon of choice in this movement. The February 2009 edition of the *travelhorizons*<sup>™</sup> survey, a nationally representative survey of 2,200 U.S. adults co-authored every 90 days by the Y Partnership and the U.S. Travel Association, revealed that 64 percent of respondents intend to comparison shop online. Another 87 percent plan to book packages to save money.

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## *Lee VCB to launch booking engine on consumer Web site/Page 2*

According to Davenport, the VCB's consumer Web site at [www.FortMyers-Sanibel.com](http://www.FortMyers-Sanibel.com) ended 2008 with 972,666 visits and 763,561 unique visitors, which she says is quite a bit higher than similar-sized destination management organizations. "We're probably much more on par with larger-sized destinations," she said.

"We're investing significantly to drive consumers to our Web site through a variety of online and traditional marketing channels, and we've been highly successful in our efforts. Now we want to capitalize on the interest generated in a vacation to our destination by closing the sale more immediately," she said. "Adding a booking engine is a logical next step to the vacation planning tools we already feature on the site."

Visitors using the new booking engine will be able to build customized packages to meet their vacation needs as well as shop rates and availability for accommodations, attractions, airfare, ground transportation and other vacation offerings and then book these directly on the site in a matter of minutes.

When selecting a company with which to partner for the new booking service, Davenport said the VCB looked at several possible partners and chose Advanced Reservation Systems, Inc. (ARES) because of its flexibility in meeting the organization's needs. ARES's proprietary reservations and ticketing software is designed specifically for the CVB market, enabling organizations to customize exactly which products to offer, how to display and feature them, and even how to rank them. Its custom packaging solution allows users to create packages to feature on their Web site.

"The more industry partners work with us to create and market unique packages, competitive rates and other vacation offers, the more incentive consumers will have to visit our destination and to stay longer. Since we're pooling and pre-packaging compelling experiences for them, they'll not only receive great value but they'll also save vacation planning time," said Davenport.

The booking capability will be added to the VCB's existing consumer Web site in time for the destination's *Islands FallFest* promotion, which runs from Sept. 1 through Nov. 14, 2009. With special packages created to encourage fall visitation to the area, the promotion combines annual events and festivals with special rates and value added deals for visitors to Florida's unspoiled island sanctuary. The new service also will be incorporated into the VCB's new

**-MORE-**

***Lee VCB to launch booking engine on consumer Web site/Page 3***

consumer Web site, which is slated for redesign in the organization's next fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1, 2009.

"We're excited to be adding the convenience of one-stop shopping for our visitors," said Davenport. "The new service will give our partners a new channel for bookings to their business, and a leg up on destinations that don't currently offer such a service."

**About ARES**

Founded in 1995 and based in San Diego, Calif., Advanced Reservation Systems, Inc (ARES) specializes in customized reservation solutions for the tourism industry and currently serves some of the largest convention and visitor bureaus in major tourist markets as well as world-famous attractions and online media channels. These organizations utilize ARES's proprietary reservation and dynamic packaging software to offer a comprehensive array of lodging, activity and tour products to their visitors.

**-30-**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel include: Sanibel Island, Captiva Island, Fort Myers Beach, Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Estero, Cape Coral, Pine Island, Boca Grande & Outer islands, North Fort Myers, Lehigh Acres.*