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# Equine industry can help drive economy

When race fans converge on Camden this weekend for the 2010 Carolina First Carolina Cup, it once again will be a highlight of Kershaw County's social calendar. But this time-honored tradition is about more than just parties and fashion. It's about an economic sector that is vital to the state in general and the Midlands in particular.

Make no mistake: The equine industry in the Palmetto State is big business. According to the S.C. Department of Agriculture, its annual impact is \$330 million. What's more, equine-related assets — land, buildings, trucks, trailers, carriages, carts, barrels, etc. — totaled just under \$3 billion in the latest equine census, completed in 2004. That is a huge investment in an industry whose role in our economy is overlooked too easily and ignored too often.

Kershaw County has more horses per capita than any other area of central South Carolina — an entire economic cluster, focused on the equine industry and including workers with the unique skills and expertise to support it.

Perhaps nowhere is the direct and indirect value of the industry more evident than in the Carolina and Colonial cups. Just consider these findings from a 2005 study of the two steeplechase events:

- Direct expenditures related to the races were nearly \$4.4 million.
- More than 82 percent of the fans who attended were from out of town.
- Tourism dollars — that is, ex-

penditures by visitors — totaled \$3.4 million.

Camden/Kershaw businesses took in almost \$1.2 million in additional revenue — excluding what was spent inside the track. "It should be noted that these values are 'new money' into the economic stream," the study states.

The total economic impact on the regional economy was more than \$6.5 million.

With the opening of the S.C. Equine Park in Camden, the collective value of the industry to the Midlands is likely to grow

even more. This 40-acre facility has been designed for a full range of activities, breeds and users, and already is proving to be a high-value asset.

In just its first three months of

operation, the park generated more than \$500,000 to the state's economy. But that's just the beginning. An economic impact study by the S.C. Equine Promotion Foundation concluded the facility has the potential to generate \$22 million annually in state tourism revenues and create 300 new jobs in the region.

Clearly, the equine industry and its signature events, the Carolina and Colonial cups, are contributing significantly to the region's economic well-being. However, the value goes beyond statistics about jobs, tourism and revenues.

For example, KershawHealth, which provides a broad range of medical, health and wellness facilities throughout the area, has been the beneficiary of the annual races. Receipts from both have helped to purchase advanced equipment and new technologies that are prevent-

ing illness and improving — even saving — lives every day.

Additionally, through the S.C. Committee of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation, horses and select inmates at the Wateree River Correctional Institution truly get a second chance. By caring for retired thoroughbreds, the prisoners learn equine industry job skills as well as how to be responsible for the welfare of another life. I've seen firsthand how this can lead to miraculous transformations. Inmates who complete the program are prepared better to become contributing members of society after completing their sentences.

There is every reason to believe that the region's equine industry, as strong as it is, will only get stronger. This is not only a function of what we have to offer in terms of a skilled workforce, elite facilities and world-class racing events.

Our mild climate allows year-round training, which is impossible during the kind of harsh winters the North and Midwest experienced this year. This, in turn, can attract and encourage more and more people to bring their horses — and their families — to the Midlands.

None of this is meant to downplay or minimize the great fun that tens of thousands of race fans will enjoy at the Carolina Cup. It is simply a reminder that when those regal horses are out there on the track, they'll be generating more than excitement. They'll be helping to generate much-needed economic activity for the region, its businesses, its citizens and all of South Carolina.

*Mr. Rainey, who lives in Camden, is an attorney and chairman of the S.C. Board of Economic Advisors.*



**John Rainey**

Guest Columnist

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