Local Accommodation Tax Distribution Evaluation: A Charleston Case

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What is Accommodation Tax (A-Tax)?

A special *ad valorem* tax, assessed as a percentage of the price of an occupied transient room (Fujii, Khaled and Mak, 1985).

In South Carolina: “the rentals or charges for sleeping accommodations furnished at any place in which rooms, lodgings, or sleeping accommodations of any kind are furnished. “

Adopted in most states in the U.S. and many European countries.

In the United States, the different levels of a-tax in state, county, and city were governed by state laws.
What is Accommodation Tax (A-Tax)?

In Charleston, South Carolina, USA, if you stay in a hotel room with an advertised price of $100:

\[
\text{Total} = \text{Advertised Price} + \text{State Sales Tax} + \text{Location Option Tax} + \text{State A-Tax} + \text{County A-Tax} + \text{City A-Tax} \\
= 100 + 6\% \text{ state sales tax} + 2.5\% \text{ location option tax} + 2\% \text{ state a-tax} + 2\% \text{ county a-tax} + 2\% \text{ city a-tax} = 114.5
\]

Every sales of products or service in the state of South Carolina

Every sales of products or service in Charleston County

Every sales of transient rentals of rooms, camps, or lodging, Charged by state, county, and municipal government
Theoretical Basis for Accommodation Tax

Elasticity of Supply & Demand

The ratio of proportional change in demand based on percentage change in price

Tax Incidence

How much can hoteliers shift tax to tourists?

Exportability

How much can locals shift tax to non-residents?

Use of Funds

How to best allocate collected tax?

Tax Equity Progressivity

Is it fair for the tourists to pay?

Adapted from Spengler and Uysal, 1989
The Optimal Accommodation Tax Distribution

- Tax fund made available
- Allocated to events or businesses
  - Motivate more visitors to come
  - Increased accommodation Tax
    - Increase visitor arrival and hotel occupancy

Adapted from Litvin, Crotts, Blackwell, and Styles, 2006
The Optimal Accommodation Tax Distribution


In the small counties of South Carolina, promotion of the arts, cultural events, and other tourism-related events is a successful strategy.
About Charleston County Case

The second largest city in South Carolina;

A population of 664K; the 75th largest metropolitan in the U.S;

A historic and beach city;

Voted as the most friendly city, the most polite and hospitable city in America, the best tourist city in the U.S. in 2011 by Travel + Leisure Magazine;

Four million tourists annually.
Past Problems

Fiscal Year of 2012 in Charleston County:

Net Revenue in a-tax: around 10 Million USD

1. Charleston County: 1.75 M on debt services on historic courthouse, library, etc.; 3.2 M on county operations
2. Charleston CVB (tourism bureau): 1 M on operations
3. Bond: 1.5 M on convention center, Tennis complex, football stadium, and Arena
4. 2.5 M city governments
5. Discretionary fund to supporting tourism/hospitality activities $162,500 USD
The accommodations tax is available under state law SC 6-1-530 for the following tourism-related expenditures:

- Advertising and promotion related to tourism development
- Maintenance or operation of tourist-related building or facility
- Construction of tourist-related building or facility
- Beach renourishment
Past Problems

Applicants include event organizers (Wine & Food Festival, Spoleto festival), attractions (Patriots Points, Magnolia Plantations), municipal government (New Year’s event), a total amount of about 1M in 2012.

How do you determine whether or not, and how much to give to each applicant?
Past Problems

A panel of 9 county council members determines the distribution;

The applicants need to submit an application package and the decisions were made during a hearing;

Very political in nature – committee members support their constituencies;

the loudest voices from the applicants or the committee members got heard;

Arbitrary decisions and amount.
Evaluation Improvements in FY 2012

The County council approached the Convention and Visitors Bureau and the university;

Panel Discussions: the establishment of an evaluation formula:

**Economic impact (50%) + media impact (20%) + community impact (10%) + panel member judgment (20%)**
Scoring System

Economic Impact Calculation (Weight: 50%)

Project Influence Factor (PIF) \times \text{Number of Visitors} \times \text{Daily Spending} \times \text{Length of stay} = \text{Total Direct Impact}

- Replaced daily spending with average ($183).
- Multiplier used of 1.2 for ongoing / year-round promotion.
- Multiplier used of 1.2 for off-season events.

Total Direct Impact $\Rightarrow$ Score

Highest scoring applicant earns score of 100, with others scored in proportion.
Evaluation Improvements in FY 2012

Project Influence Factor

A ratio based on weighing the potential economic influence of the applicant’s proposed project, the likelihood that the visitors came to the Charleston area specifically because of the applicant’s project, and the substantiation of the applicant’s reported research / data.

For example: a highway garbage collection project…
Scoring System

**Community Impact Calculation (Weight: 10%)**
Business investment in the Charleston community:
Jobs - Full-time and Part-time, Capital Investments
*Each application rated between 0-100.*

**Media Impact Calculation (Weight: 20%)**
Average of scores for all five panel members
*Each application rated between 0-100.*

**Tourism Panel (Weight: 20%)**
Average of scores for all five panel members
*Each application rated between 0-100.*
Media Scoring Dispersion of Panelists

![Graph showing media scoring dispersion of panelists with lines for J1, J2, J3, and J4]

1. Each line represents a different panelist (J1, J2, J3, J4).
2. The y-axis represents the score range from 0 to 100.
3. The x-axis represents the timeline from 1 to 26, possibly indicating individual data points or time segments.
4. The dispersion indicates variability in scoring among panelists.

[Graph Image]
Final Scores and Funding Recommendations

In 2011, 26 Applications Received
Total available for recommended disbursement: $162,500

Final Score =
Economic Impact Score × 0.5
+ Community Impact Score × 0.1
+ Media Impact Score × 0.2
+ Tourism Panel Score × 0.2

Translating Scores into Funding Recommendations:
Overall points were totaled for those applications scoring 15 or better.
(830.23 Points)

$162,500 in available funds / 830.23 Points = $195.73 per point
## FY 2012 Details

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<th>Code</th>
<th>Applicant Name</th>
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<th>Economic Impact Score 50%</th>
<th>Total Investment</th>
<th>Community Impact Score 10%</th>
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<th>Panel Judgment (0-100), 20%</th>
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<td>League of Charleston Theatres</td>
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Totals 830.23 $162,500
From 2008-2012, all recommendations were adopted in Charleston County finance committee without any questions during committee meetings.
Evaluations and Feedbacks

**However, weaknesses:**

1. The lack of theoretical foundation for the percentage of each impact;
2. Disadvantages of being a new event/activities;
3. Does not take into account the importance of a-tax funding to the event;
4. Events and permanent attractions are two types of animals – compare apples with oranges?
5. Subjective scores;
6. Arbitrary cutoff scores.
Evaluations and Feedbacks

Small tweaks every year:

1. Added website analytics statistics to evaluate media impact;

2. Focus on national and regional media and dropped local media questions;

3. Ask about the amount of visitors due to the specific project;

4. In 2012-2013, set aside special fund for seed projects.
Evaluations and Feedbacks

Racial tension still exists:

“How many African Americans are on the panel?”

Robert Ford, South Carolina State Senator
Lesson Learned

A successful collaboration between local government, local Convention and Visitors Bureau and a university;

University’s crucial role in the evaluation process due to its apolitical stance on the issue;

Useful and effective even without a rigorous theoretical foundation;

The structure is flexible enough for continuous tweaking and readjusting.
References


Thank you!

Questions?