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Researchers defend cruise study results

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KEY WEST — Researchers who conducted a study on the impacts of cruise ship tourism defended findings that the average cruise ship passenger spends \$27 while in Key West, but conceded that some expenditures might not have been calculated.

"This is by far the most thorough study that has been done in Key West," said James B. London, a Clemson University professor who worked with Thomas J. Murray on the study. "The numbers surprised us and we went back and looked at them again several times."

The study found that cruise ship passengers on average were in Key West three hours and spent \$27.41. More than 900 cruise ship passengers were surveyed.

But passengers responding to the survey might not have included tickets for tours and attractions purchased while on board the cruise ship, London said, in response to questions from City Commissioner Ed Scales. Scales is general counsel to Historic Tours of America, which operates the Conch Tour Train and Trolleys and attractions like the Key West Aquarium, Truman's Little White House and Flagler Station Overseas Railway Historium.

London and Murray explained their methods for completing the 352-page Cruise Ship Quality of Life Study and took questions from commissioners during a workshop Tuesday night. The city hired Thomas J. Murray & Associates to conduct the study as a result of legal action by civic group Last Stand.

London compared their findings with studies conducted in 1994 by Price Waterhouse and in 1997 by Florida Caribbean Cruise Association, both of which showed passengers spending less in Key West than other ports of call. The FCCA report said the average passenger spent \$41 in Key West — the least spent at 10 ports in a survey that included Aruba, the Bahamas and also St. Thomas, where the average passenger spent \$225, London said.

Key West business owner Tamara Camden disagreed with the low numbers and criticized the consultants for comparing their survey with old data. "I do my own surveys all the time," said the owner of Key West Paradise, estimating most cruise ship passengers are spending around \$100 when attractions and tours are factored in. With the report complete, the next step is for Thomas J. Murray & Associates to work with members of the city staff to come up with ways to manage tourism from cruise ships, Murray said.

Much of the focus on the study's findings has been on the money generated by cruise ships and their passengers, but the study also investigated the physical and environmental impacts of cruise ships. "All of this ties into quality of life, and the overall, 'how do you feel about cruise ships,'" London said.

Last week, Mayor Jimmy Weekley questioned whether the study accomplished its mission, but said Tuesday night that he's encouraged to hear the consultants will help city officials formulate a plan to balance cruise ships and quality of life for residents and visitors.