

Post-COVID lull: Visitor count drops, spending slightly up for Lancaster's 2025 tourism industry

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By Sarah Nicell, Staff Writer

The total number of visitors to Lancaster County decreased in 2025 for the first time in five years as the tourism industry hit a post-pandemic lull, according to a recent tourism study.

Still, local tourism experts and vendors have hope for a better 2026 outcome — they say rising prices nationwide have made Lancaster an optimal destination for people focused on an affordable, driveable trip.

Discover Lancaster, the county's tourism marketing organization, made public its 2025 annual tourism report on May 6. Jeff Vasser, Discover Lancaster's CEO, said the county's tourism industry is starting to settle after years of rampant growth since 2021, especially now that COVID-19 era federal dollars supporting tourism have run dry.

“Those early couple years post-COVID reflected pent up demand of people wanting to get away and get out,” Vasser said in an interview on May 13. “I’m not sure if those double digit increases were sustainable.”

In 2025, 10 million visitors came to Lancaster County, a 1.7% decrease from 2024. It's the first decrease in visitors since 2020, when the pandemic shut down travel. Tourism Economics — a subsidiary of Oxford Economics, an advisory firm that releases annual tourism research reports — defines visitors as those who stayed in Lancaster County overnight or traveled more than 50 miles to get there.

Spending by those visitors grew .4% in 2025, up to \$2.7 billion, several percentage points less than growth in previous post-pandemic years. Vasser said spending grew in part due to inflation.

Vasser attributed the visitation decrease to economic uncertainty throughout 2025, including concerns about the impact of tariffs, layoffs by the federal government and varied propensity to travel. And rather than scheduling trips months in advance, people tended to book weeks ahead, meaning more uncertainty for tourism destinations and less commitment to spend by prospective vacationers.

“It just kept us from having any sustained momentum,” Vasser said. “Consumer confidence was up, consumer confidence was down at varying points throughout the year.”

A boost for Lancaster’s food scene, lodging ... and worry for rising prices.

Across all categories evaluated by the tourism report, spending on the food and beverage industry saw the greatest growth at 2% in 2025, with lodging and retail following close behind.

Vasser credited local restaurants’ recent accolades for the boost, along with the county’s diverse food scene.

“The two things that travelers tend to do the most when they’re on the road is shop and eat,” Vasser said. “And tops is dining.”

Leeann Mason, a co-proprietor for Lancaster city’s Luca and Pizzeria Luca, said on May 15 that both restaurants performed well in 2025. Sales at the pizzeria grew 20% to 30% in 2025, Mason said, and sales are up 25% year-over-year so far for 2026. The restaurants haven’t struggled with hiring and are often at maximum capacity for seating.

In March, Luca chef Nathan Flaim [was named a finalist in the 2026 James Beard Restaurant and Chef Awards](#), which Mason said has given Luca a boost.

But rising costs, from maintenance prices to health insurance costs for employees, have made things difficult, Mason said. She said prices for maintenance have increased hundreds of dollars in recent years, and insurance costs have continued to rise.

Still, Luca has tried to raise costs sparingly, Mason, with an estimated 10% increase since 2022. The pizzeria’s pizzas currently range from \$17 to \$23.

“How much are you going to buy a pizza for? There is a cap. It doesn’t matter how good it is,” Mason said. “I’m not going to be able to sell a \$30 pizza.”

Francisco Gomez de la Torre of Frisco’s, a Peruvian-style chicken restaurant, reopened his Lancaster city restaurant in summer 2024 after previously closing all four Frisco’s locations around Lancaster County due to the increasing cost of goods and a decline in sales. On May 14, he said Frisco’s was just lucky to survive 2025.

This year, though, Gomez de la Torre said the increase in customers to his Lancaster city restaurant has shocked him. Every month so far this year has seen double-digit growth in sales, he said. His confidence in the business was good enough to open an express location on the rooftop of Tellus360 in late May.

“The number of people we serve, there’s where the growth is,” Gomez de la Torre said. “It’s not so much about higher prices. Our average ticket is pretty much flat (compared) to last year.”

The number of visitors staying overnight in Lancaster County dropped 2% in 2025, according to the Tourism Economics report, but visitors still spent \$387 million on lodging.

Stephen Sikking, a partner at Eden Resort & Suites in Manheim Township and the Fulton Steamboat Inn in East Lampeter, said both his hotels were slightly up in sales due to people electing for group travel.

For 2026, Sikking said he expects national economic trends, along with the price of the wars in Iran, Russia and Ukraine, to make an impact, though what that looks like is uncertain.

“Time will tell,” Sikking said via email on May 28. “For now, Lancaster appears to be somewhat (insulated) from international travel concerns or those requiring flights.”

Slower growth for other industries

Visitor spending on the entertainment and recreation industries grew .1% in 2025, its smallest increase since the pandemic. Last year, spending grew nearly 8%.

Brandon Martin, CEO of the American Music Theatre in East Lampeter Township, said 2025 sales were just as strong as 2024, but there were noticeable headwinds that forced the theater to up its marketing efforts. It’s not easy, Martin said, for destinations to react quickly to a shifting market when live shows require planning up to a year ahead.

“Rising expenses in the live entertainment industry have a very real trickle-down effect, particularly relating to concerts,” Martin said via email on June 2. “When an artist’s overhead to tour increases, that ultimately impacts the price of a ticket.”

Sight & Sound Theatres in Strasburg Township, another driver of Lancaster County’s entertainment sector, has long served as one of the county’s top tourism destinations. In 2025, the theater filled 96% of its seats, equating to 850,000 visitors, more than the year prior.

Sara Murphy, vice president of strategic development at Sight & Sound and a board member of Discover Lancaster, said 2025 was one of the first years since 2020 that the theater was able to fill all its frontline hospitality positions.

And for 2026, as of May 22, the theater had already sold 84% of its available tickets for the year.

“I know there’s a lot of uncertainty and variables that can impact tourism,” Murphy said on May 22, “but I do like to think about how Lancaster is this special destination.”

Looking forward

Excitement for events related to the 250th anniversary since the founding of the U.S., the World Cup and high gas prices will likely impact Lancaster’s 2026 tourism industry, Vasser said.

Plus, as prices rise nationally across industries, Vasser said Lancaster County’s lower price point than Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York City will prove advantageous.

“If people are reluctant to get on an airplane, and you look at what’s happening right now with the cost of fuel, people are going to be staying closer to home,” Vasser said. “That plays to our advantage.”

A May press release from Discover Lancaster said lodging revenue increased by 4.7% year-over-year for the first quarter of 2026, and demand for lodging increased by 2.4%.

“People are staying longer, and spending more money when they’re here, and those are good indicators,” Vasser said.

Official data from Tourism Economics on how Lancaster County’s tourism industry actually performed in 2026 won’t come out until mid-2027.

But Vasser remains optimistic. Sight & Sound is currently celebrating its 50th anniversary. The new Thaddeus Stevens & Lydia Hamilton Smith Center for History and Democracy opened in Lancaster city in May. The Chip Factory Hotel in Columbia is set to open to guests in late July. Bird-in-Hand Family Restaurant & Smorgasbord in Leacock Township is back up and running after its 2024 fire.

John Smucker, the owner of the Bird-in-Hand Corporation that runs the restaurant and nearby lodging, said his businesses are finally finding their new normal after reopening. At the Bird-in-Hand Family Inn, which has seen more last-minute bookings, Smucker has started to offer discounts in response to the public’s rising price concerns, even if it might mean he doesn’t achieve all his financial goals.

“As long as they get here and we’re not too far off our projections, we’re in good shape. If they don’t come, that’s something completely different,” Smucker said, “but so far they’re here.”

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