Police Captain: “Gentlemen, the city of Fort Lauderdale is once again under fire from the north. We’ve survived it before and I reckon we’re gonna survive it again. To you newly installed officers on the force, I’d like to give you a little rundown on what to expect. Expect anything. Anything and everything, cause that’s what you’re gonna get.”

— *Where the Boys Are* (1960)

It’s been a long, cold winter, and the cold weather isn’t helping the economy. As a recent *New York Times* article pointed out, “Economists have placed much of the blame for the recent spate of weak economic data on the effects of the unseasonable cold in the Northeast, Midwest and South, which they project will shave a few tenths of a percent off the growth of gross domestic product in the first quarter.”¹

Fewer sales and lower job growth inevitably show up in state revenue. That’s one reason forecasting state revenue is such a miserable job. You have to forecast not only the economy and taxes but also the weather.

Still, the nice thing about bad weather is that it eventually passes and usually much more quickly than a recession. Spring will soon be here, and people will emerge from their homes and start to buy all the things they’ve been putting off. The second quarter of this year is likely to be better than the first, and in the meantime, the cold weather inevitably means that one segment of the population — college students — will be anxiously searching for the best warm place to pass the great American ritual of spring break.

I assume you already know what spring break is, but if not, it’s a week or so during the spring when U.S. colleges and universities release their students for a break from the grind of studying, and the students head, generally, in a southerly direction in search of fun. The spring break season stretches from the beginning of March until the second week of April. As one study put it, “This vacation is a national, cultural event for both the U.S. student population and the locations to which they travel.” I found two dozen movies about spring break on the Internet, ranging from 1960’s innocent-but-spicy-for-its-time *Where the Boys Are* to the noxious *Spring Breakers* from last year.

The years between those movies more or less cover the history of spring break in the United States, although the practice of college students heading south for the sun dates back to the 1930s and started innocently enough. In 1934, Sam Ingram, a Colgate College swim coach, brought his team to the sleepy Florida town of Fort Lauderdale to train at the Casino Pool, the state’s first Olympic-size swimming pool. Sensing an economic development opportunity, the city in 1938 hosted the first College Coaches’ Swim Forum at the Casino Pool, which attracted a few hundred swimmers as well as their coaches.

During World War II, rich Ivy League students, who occasionally visited Bermuda during their spring breaks, were suddenly spooked by rumors of German U-boats roaming the Caribbean. The best available alternative was to meet up with the swimmers in Florida. So Fort Lauderdale became the first official home of spring break.² *Where the Boys Are*, still the quintessential spring break movie, was set in Fort Lauderdale, on the Atlantic Ocean. *Spring Breakers*

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²Derek Thompson, “2,000 Years of Party: The Brief History and Economics of Spring Break,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 13, 2013. The 2,000 years reference refers to the notion, which seems like a stretch to me, that links the American spring break tradition to a festival in ancient Greece called “Anthestria” by young people of the time. It was dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine. For three days, people would dance, singers would perform, women would deck themselves with flowers, and Greek men would compete to see who could be the fastest to drain a cup of red wine.
was filmed around St. Petersburg and Tampa on the Gulf of Mexico. There’s more of a gap between the two films than time and geography. Spring break has grown and evolved significantly in the intervening years.

When it had the spring break market cornered in the 1950s, Fort Lauderdale attracted about 20,000 students annually and their stay was relatively low key — sun and fun, not muss and fuss. Then, in 1959, Time magazine highlighted spring break in an article titled “Beer & the Beach.” The article depicted the annual Fort Lauderdale spring break as an invasion of moderately well-behaved college students who dressed in Bermuda shorts and bikinis and spent their days and nights “beach boozing.” (“It’s not that we drink so much,” noted one attendee, “it’s that we drink all the time.”) The article shone a national spotlight on Fort Lauderdale, but it was the innocent quote at the end of the story that proved to be the spark that ignited the modern spring break phenomenon. Asked why she made the trip to Fort Lauderdale for spring break, an anonymous female student replied, “This is where the boys are.”

The phrase was picked up by a writer named Glendon Swarthout, who was teaching at Michigan State at the time. He wrote a novel about spring break in Fort Lauderdale, Where the Boys Are, which was published in 1960. That same year, the book was made into a movie starring George Hamilton, Dolores Hart, Yvette Mimieux, and Jim Hutton. The movie, like the book, told the story of four women from a Midwestern college who spend spring break in Fort Lauderdale, finding love, heartache, and fun, mostly without getting drunk. The title song, sung by Connie Francis, became a popular hit.

That was all it took. Crowds visiting Fort Lauderdale swelled to 50,000 and kept climbing. Eventually, the city was attracting between 250,000 and 350,000 college students a year during spring break. And the city reaped other benefits from its national visibility. From 1960 to 1970, Fort Lauderdale’s population grew 68.9 percent to nearly 140,000, compared with an increase of 49.3 percent among other Florida cities. Although numerous factors contributed to that boom, hosting spring break was key to setting the city apart in the state’s then-emerging tourism industry and attracting business and development to the city. As one study put it, “In the years after the release of Where the Boys Are, Fort Lauderdale had struck a delicate relationship with its duties as spring break host. Most residents and community officials in favor of continuing the tradition were willing to accept — or at least reluctantly tolerate — the annual mayhem only because of the publicity, revenue, and development it brought their city.”

The delicate relationship didn’t last. The spring breakers caused some disruption almost from the start — there were major incidents in 1961 and 1967 — but as the unruly hordes grew into the hundreds of thousands, the popularity of “Fort Liquordale” became a massive annual headache for the city and its residents. After some down years following the opening of Disney World in 1971, Fort Lauderdale’s spring break popularity rebounded in the 1980s. Those years also were when the partying was the loudest and wildest — so wild in fact that jittery city leaders once voted to purchase a riot tank with a water cannon to control the potentially rampaging student hordes. The cannon was never used, but the city took other steps to discourage its spring visitors. It passed stricter laws against public drinking, and Mayor Robert Dressler appeared on ABC’s Good Morning America to tell students they were no longer welcome. Students got the message and began migrating farther south and west and to destinations outside the United States that were more welcoming. The arc of Fort Lauderdale’s relationship formed a pattern that would be played out in other cities in later years.

An estimated 1.5 million students go on spring break annually and spend more than a billion dollars.

Today, an estimated 1.5 million students go on spring break annually and spend more than a billion dollars. Those numbers are, by the way, estimates. No city knows the true number because, as one study points out, “Spring Break is not a ‘turnstile’ event such as the Olympics or a convention where accurate numbers can be recorded.” The total could be higher or lower. But one thing is clear, the students, for all the havoc that they wreak, spend a lot of money on entertainment, lodging, and, of course, drinking. Here’s a fun fact that would make Dolores Hart blush: On average, college students consume six drinks per week. On spring break, both men and women consume at least 10 drinks per day.

Today’s spring breakers are apt to go anywhere. The beach remains a popular destination, but students find all sorts of places to amuse themselves these days because an industry has grown up around attracting the students and separating them from their money. The locales range from New Orleans to Las Vegas, to New England (for skiing), or to Mexico. But the beaches of the South still draw the biggest crowds. South Padre Island on the lower Texas Gulf coast attracts around 200,000 spring break visitors. The most popular current spring break beach destination is Panama City Beach, Fla., with about 500,000 student visitors during the season.

While it’s fun to think about a week of reckless spring break partying, which is about all I can do, a more mundane point worth underscoring is the economic effect of that concentrated revelry. The economic equation associated with spring break is decidedly a mixed proposition for the
cities that can lure the crowds of students. There’s a definite boost for the local economy, but as Fort Lauderdale was the first city to learn, it is at best a high-risk proposition. So high risk, in fact, that some cities besides Fort Lauderdale also have decided to actively downplay spring break. In fact, the recent history of Florida beaches is a history of cities embracing spring break, finally getting sick of it, and then trying to gracefully tone down the party so the locals can get some sleep.

**Spring break is a definite boost for the local economy, but as Fort Lauderdale was the first city to learn, it is at best a high-risk proposition.**

A good example is Daytona Beach. It was a student magnet in the 1980s, when spring break generated about $120 million a year in economic activity. Since the early 1990s, though, local officials have attempted to shift the city’s image from “a trashy Spring Break spot to a dazzling destination for families and snowbirds,” as one local development expert put it. The city has made progress but hasn’t been entirely successful. Beachside business owners interviewed in a 2013 *Daytona Beach News-Journal* article said the area has lost out on a massive amount of business on which other locations have capitalized. “We’ve turned our back on a very high economic generator and nothing came to replace that,” said George Karamitos, owner of a local surf shop. The local hotels appear to be less certain of the loss, mainly because of property damage and the surprisingly large number of students who fell from balconies — a total that peaked at eight in Daytona Beach in 1989 — one of which was fatal. According to the *News-Journal*, fights had become common, and “three hotels were shut down amid reports of urine, vomit and feces in the halls and stairways.” Charming.

Still, it’s hard for cities with the right attributes to ignore the money sloshing around with the beer, and cities have sometimes spurned the spring breakers only to change their minds. In 2009, Panama City Beach took its turn throwing cold water on the festivities, fearing spring break was hurting its image. Then other events intervened: the recession and then the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April 2010. With the Florida economy slack and tar balls washing up on the beaches, Panama City Beach tourism officials in 2011 once again began visiting college campuses all over the Midwest to deliver the message that the spring break party was back on.

The city had discovered that it needed the estimated $100 million in economic activity that the visiting students brought with them. The city also needed to polish its image.

“When the kids come down here and have a great time and see our beaches are clean, they’ll be our ambassadors and tell the rest of the world,” Dan Rowe, president and chief executive of the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, told *The Wall Street Journal*. According to the *Journal*, “All over the Gulf Coast, vacation communities hurt by the oil spill see spring break as critical to reviving their economies and kickstarting tourism before the important summer season.”

It’s difficult to parse out the actual economic and fiscal effects for those cities. There are surprisingly few studies available that look at the economic impact in any sort of rigorous way, and most of the statistics I found on the subject were of somewhat suspect origin at best — mostly a product of boosterism. Even so, it’s easy to see the initial attraction of spring break. In terms of financing, the cost of a vibrant tourism industry, for the areas that can support it, tends to be low. And events like spring break are an export industry that doesn’t involve actually making and exporting goods. The opportunity for high profits with little in the way of direct, local financial and infrastructure investment is enough to make the proposition attractive.

In spring break’s case, the tourism is promoted by localities with amenities to offer students, but the idea doesn’t have to be “sold” in the way that some economic development projects are. Students never demand tax concessions in exchange for showing up in Las Vegas or Panama City Beach. The casinos, beaches, and night life are enough.

**Cities have sometimes spurned the spring breakers only to change their minds.**

But the local economic benefits can be fleeting. Spring break’s primary economic benefit is from higher employment since it doesn’t take much capital investment to sell beer. But the jobs tend to be seasonal and come and go with the crowds. Local governments generate income via taxes on hotels, alcohol, and other tourist activities. States with income taxes also benefit, and there’s some impact on any corporate taxes levied by the state. However, the benefits to local residents aren’t spread evenly, and the profits tend to go to those that serve the crowds, while the costs are carried by those who simply live in the town. That has proven to be a recurring spring break theme but not one that gets mentioned in many convention and visitor bureau brochures.

In that regard, the most detailed analysis of spring break economics is a 2008 dissertation by John Laurie of the

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University of New Orleans. Laurie examined four popular spring break destinations — Daytona Beach, Panama City Beach, South Padre Island, Texas, and Lake Havasu City, Ariz. Laurie used local tax data to gauge the level of economic effect of spring break relative to the summer when those towns also attract large numbers of tourists. His hypothesis was that spring break would be the most important time of the year economically for the cities. His results, though, showed otherwise. “However, hotel tax collected by each county indicates that each case study area has a higher number of visitors in July as opposed to March,” he wrote. “Additionally, while each of the case study areas, including Daytona Beach, showed a high level of visitor expenditures via sales tax, during March; it was the month of July that had the greatest economic impact for each city. In fact, expenditures by visitors in July were nearly twice as high as in March.”

Take a couple of examples. In Daytona Beach, the city’s tourism industry overall doesn’t appear to have suffered as a result of its decision to downplay spring break, even if it has left local surf shops high and dry. That’s partly because the city still attracts spring breakers despite itself, and partly because of the city’s marketing other events. “Although Daytona Beach no longer markets toward or draws the tremendous Spring Break crowds of the 1980s, this does not appear to have harmed the county tax revenue during the spring months,” Laurie said. “Increases occur between February and April and again in July and August. The spike during the spring months is consistent with the family oriented events that Daytona Beach is now marketing — NASCAR events (Daytona 500), Family Spring Break, Bike Week and the general influx of visitors that coastal northern Florida receives during the early spring. While college students on Spring Break no doubt contribute, they are just one of many groups driving sales tax receipts upward, not the primary group.”

In Panama City Beach, where you might expect the tax take from spring break to be highest, the totals were fairly pedestrian. March wasn’t anything special, although April was a strong month for sales and hotel tax receipts. “This indicates that while large numbers of students visit Panama City Beach during Spring Break, the city is not being rewarded in terms of dollars,” Laurie wrote. Why? “Students are spending large parts of the day on the beach with nothing but alcohol to sustain them,” he speculated. “Much of their initial alcohol reserve was likely purchased before their trip even began.” The highest months in terms of tax collections in Panama City Beach are July and August when the families show up, giving credence to something a Fort Lauderdale city commissioner said in 1985: “I’d rather have 100,000 people spend a lot of money than 300,000 who spend a little money.”

Pretty much the same pattern shows up for South Padre Island and Lake Havasu City. Spring break has an effect that clearly can be identified in the tax data, but it’s more muted than you might expect. South Padre Island probably is the largest single outlier, because the tax growth on the island is centered on the final quarter of the year — the dead of winter — when what we in Texas affectionately call “snow birds” show up in droves to crowd RV parks all along the coast and far inland.

In Panama City Beach, where you might expect the tax take from spring break to be highest, the totals were fairly pedestrian.

Laurie also picked a weird social indicator to examine the local sociocultural effects of spring break. “Because behavior during Spring Break centers on alcohol consumption and sex, it can be considered much more decadent than that of other types of tourism,” he wrote. “As a result, church formation over time can be viewed as a negative reaction of residents to such behavior. Using that measure, if the percentage of new church formation significantly exceeds the percentage of population increase over time, it would indicate a growing dissatisfaction with Spring Break and would be an indicator of socio-cultural change.” Once again, he was disappointed. “Overall, church growth did not increase at a greater rate in the Spring Break locations than that of the in-state cities that I compared to each Spring Break locale. Bay County, the home of Panama City Beach, the current Spring Break Mecca, was the only Spring Break city to show a significant increase in church growth in comparison,” he wrote.

On the less metaphysical question of how spring break affected local public services, he found it had little impact on healthcare service levels, despite a balcony dive or two, but caused a spike in local crimes and vehicle citations. The increases in crime were most significant in Panama City Beach and South Padre Island, the two areas with the smallest number of local residents, and presumably the least able to deal with a massive influx of students.

Not all the towns have the same outlook as Daytona Beach on the economic trade-offs of spring break. South Padre Island, which really is just a long sand bar in the Gulf of Mexico, is one of those cities. Local officials had the University of Texas-Pan American prepare a fairly detailed economic analysis for the island in 2000 so that it could better understand its market. It found that spring break had

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8Scott Maier, “Spring Break Has Significant Impact on South Padre, UTPA Survey Shows,” The University of Texas-Pan American (Sept. 20, 2000).
more than a $200 million impact on “the growth and popularity of South Padre Island,” with about 130,000 spring breakers staying at island hotels, motels, and condominiums and another 23,000 staying in other types of island housing, probably including tents on the beach, which aren’t uncommon.

One advantage South Padre Island offers is that it can draw from a large in-state population — there are 1.5 million college students in Texas. Also, there’s one other factor: Many colleges and universities in Texas share the same spring break dates. “Texas Week,” as officials on South Padre Island call it, is when they see their largest infusion of tourists, if not their largest tax take.

It would be nice if someone did a thorough cost benefit analysis of spring break, even if it was just for one city. Laurie came close, but he never quite tied costs to gains, which, in fairness, wasn’t his purpose. Maybe it doesn’t really matter. If you have the beaches, you’ll get the kids, and then it’s just a matter of how many of them you want to attract. It’s an economic development calculation that the spring break sites must make, and the answer seems to be: We’ll do it till it hurts.

The spring ritual does provide economic and fiscal benefits, but they’re offset by the higher costs for public services and the annoyance factor for local residents, who pay the bulk of local taxes.

I have to admit, spring break turned out to be less of a fiscal windfall for the cities than I imagined when I conceived this column. Like Laurie, I would have expected free-spending college students to cause a major ripple in local economic activity and therefore taxes. That turns out to be only partly true. The spring ritual does provide economic and fiscal benefits, but they’re offset by the higher costs for public services and the annoyance factor for local residents, who pay the bulk of local taxes. Students can only bring so much economic power to the table. In that regard, Derek Thompson was right when he wrote in The Atlantic last year: “They buy bad booze in bulk, they sleep five to a room, they lie out under the sun with nothing but alcohol and tanning lotion, and they hunt around for the best deals for dinner and accommodation, even if it means staying in a different city and driving to the beach every morning.”

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