

Invisible industry, visible rewards

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By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

The week of May 17 to May 23 appeared to be an ordinary one, but it was singled out at the national level as National Tourism Week and, in the state, as Rhode Island Tourism Week, in case you did not know, and it was recognized by both the governor and by the mayor of Providence at recent luncheons. Well, ho-hum, another of the many proclamations and paper awards that so often come out of these offices that few give them much attention. But this one should cause Rhode Islanders to sit up and take notice.

Tourism is sometimes called the "invisible industry" because its presence is not readily visible, but from the gasoline stations and restaurants along the highways that bring visitors to the site-oriented historic houses and beaches, this silent generator of businesses, jobs, wages and taxes provides some impressive figures.

Approximately five million persons in this country are employed in the tourist trade, ranking it as the fifth-largest retailing operation in the nation. Further, in 31 states it ranks as the first-, second- or third-largest employer. Within Rhode Island, approximately 3300 businesses encompassing more than 23,000 employees make tourism the third-largest industry group after health services and jewelry. And these jobs create more than \$200 million in wages.

Money spent by visitors in the state last year topped \$1 billion, a figure happily announced by the governor at a Newport luncheon given for groups involved in the business. A study done at the University of Rhode Island claims that this expenditure translates into nearly \$40 million for the state coffers, something to make all of us happy. And the future looks even brighter.

Tourist-generated sales and services amounted to \$643 million in 1984, \$818 million in 1985 and the jump to \$1.028 billion in 1986 represents a 25 percent increase over the previous year. Of interest, the Rhode Island Department of Economic Development, where state tourism efforts are centered, had projected the \$1 billion figure for 1987, one year later than that achieved. Tourist requests of the department this year are currently running 20 percent ahead of last year.

Publicity in the region and in the nation has been favorable to the state, whether reporting the recently completed round-the-world, single-handed, sailing race ending in Newport to the recently held Festival of Historic Houses in Providence reported in *The New York Times* and other

media. Increased promotional spending by the Department of Economic Development in conjunction with Rand McNally's ranking the Providence-Newport area 19th out of 107 vacation spots and 13th for city vacations have also helped. Rand McNally groups these two cities together as Rhode Island needs to do.

The good things that are apparent in Providence and that are receiving wide recognition in the national media are starting to pay off. Combined with the energetic work of the Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau, these efforts have generated spending by visitors in the Providence area of \$277 million last year and provided 7000 jobs, according to Mayor Paolino. A historical city with strong elements of architectural splendor is an asset that has economic as well as aesthetic worth.

Although Providence has had a convention bureau since 1976, it was not until last year that the whole state was organized into six regions and a uniform hotel-room tax of 4 percent instituted. This is an effective way to fund an operation to attract tourists by having them pay a tax on their rooms, money which is used to attract more tourists. And everyone is a winner, with 2 percent allocated to the region, 1 percent to the community where the hotel is located, .6 percent to the Department of Economic Development for state tourism promotion and .4 percent to the Department of Environmental Management to purchase scenic areas.

Visitors to Rhode Island make a sizeable contribution to the state economy and Rhode Islanders need to be aware of the jobs, wages and taxes generated. There may be extra traffic and delays at restaurants and shops during certain times of the year in selected places where visitors congregate, but the few inconveniences caused are nothing compared to the positive economic impact emanating from these visits.

At the start of another projected busy tourist season, we would be well-advised to look kindly upon the out-of-state visitor and treat him or her in a cordial manner, partly because the tourist represents some of our bread and butter but also because we want these visitors to be impressed by the friendly natives so that they will return again. We are, after all, the fortunate ones, because visitors must return to their own habitats after a brief sojourn here while we in the state have it all to ourselves all year and find it especially joyful in the winter when they have all gone home.

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