

Tourism's full potential waiting in wings for R.I.

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Question: What industry in this country involves 8 million consumers daily, employs between 4 to 6 million people directly, generates nearly \$200 billion in annual expenditures and is our second largest retailing activity? If you answered tourism, you are correct.

In "The Biggest Little State in the Union" tourism's impact also is impressive. Up to \$500 million is spent a year, more than 10,000 people are employed and nearly \$20 million of state and local revenues are garnered by this business. Yet, impressive as these numbers are, this state suffers in the sense that tourism ranks as only the sixth major employer while it ranks higher in 44 other states; in fact, in 39 states, tourism employment ranks as the first, second or third employer. If this state were to increase its efforts comparable to that of other states, there also would be a greater development of this important industry.

Highly fragmented, (it includes transportation, motels, restaurants, historic areas, museums and other facets), tourism is often not appreciated nor fully understood in terms of its economic impact on local communities and the state. Further, because of the potential for increased incomes and revenues, it is important that communities recognize the opportunities to create new jobs and sources of income. This was the purpose of the conference recently held at the Biltmore Plaza under joint sponsorship of the governor's office and the University of Rhode Island Sea Grant Program. More than 200 attended to discuss tourism and its opportunities.

It is difficult to believe that in a state that draws so many tourists (it is estimated that 6.5 million will visit Rhode Island this year, more than half of them destined for Newport), that so little is known about the industry, that so few people and organizations work together to provide better "packages" of attractions, that there is no state policy on the business and that the state has not increased its

annual tourism budget of \$300,000 "since time immemorial." Only recently have some communities, Newport, for instance, moved ahead to capture a greater share of this market.

Some organized cooperation is already beginning to take shape. The Providence Preservation Society, the City of Providence, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, the Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Department of Economic Development have joined forces to better "package" tourist opportunities in and around the capital city. Through a generous contribution of space by one of the hotels, of displays, staff and office material by the convention bureau, and donated time and effort by some of the nonprofit groups mentioned, a tourist visitor center will open shortly on the Biltmore's ground floor.

These early efforts were mentioned at the conference, but more important was the early identification of the industry's problems that came from the varied organizations and groups. These ranged from

poor use of signs to bad roads and travel connections; from lack of state commitment to tourism to the need for motels in South County; and from poor welcoming facilities to inadequate and inferior beach accommodations.

The latter part of the conference was an attempt to develop ideas that would counteract some of the aforementioned problems; better cooperation and coordination among tourist organizations and government was emphasized, including better planning, improved parking and greater marketing. Often mentioned but acknowledged as difficult to change was the negative attitude of Rhode Islanders toward themselves and tourists. Better self-image and public relations were suggested to improve this negativism. According to a study of Rhode Islanders, residents, businesses and governments often regard tourists differently, with residents often citing the negative impact of congested roads and difficult parking, while businesses and governments look at the positive results of new jobs, more business and increased revenues.

It was professor Pizam from the University of Massachusetts who well summarized the benefits of tourism, citing the preservation of arts, crafts and historic sites, better shopping services and improved self-image. But these came at the expense of crowding, traffic and increased costs. Speaker after speaker emphasized the benefits from tourism and, with few exceptions, that was the prevailing mood of those at the conference.

The meeting of these many Rhode Islanders representing many diverse organizations, public and private, ended with a spirit of positivism. Rhode Island has the potential to increase jobs and revenue from one of the fastest growing industries in the country, but it will require cooperation, coordination and commitment of many groups and governments. The motivation that sprang from the conference was self-evident; only time will tell if these intentions will come to fruition.

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