

COMMENTARY/ **Chester E. Smolski**

Hospitality & Tourism; the hidden industry

At the national level it generates \$416 billion in sales and employs over 6 million people, and in Rhode Island it generates \$1.4 billion in sales and employs 28,000 people. Now the second largest economic activity here and throughout the nation, this "industry" is one that many do not recognize.

Sometimes disparagingly referred to as "the hamburger-flipper and bedsheet-snapping industry," Hospitality/Tourism is now recognized as an income and job producing activity that needs to be fostered and encouraged.

To that end a statewide meeting was recently held to better understand what our resources are, the opportunities available and what needs to be done to improve upon an industry that has doubled in the state over the past 10 years, and at the national level increased ~~to~~ 6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product.

The Rhode Island meeting, similar to meetings being held in other states, was designed to generate ideas and issues that will be discussed at the national level at a meeting to be held in Washington on Oct. 30-31 with representatives from each state. At the national level, efforts will be made to focus on the international visitor as well, recognizing there is now a \$22 billion trade surplus generated by these foreign tourists.

The effect of having visitors come and spend their money here was well illustrated by the United States Figure Skating Championships and NCAA Hockey Finals recently held at the Convention Center. Glowing reports of the economic impact, measured in the millions of dollars, singled out the importance of the industry. Spending their money in restaurants, hotels, pharmacies, gift shops, bars and on a host of other activities such as tours, theater and cabs, these consumers of pleasure also awakened many to the economic value of having such people here.

The well attended meeting, 125 people from throughout Rhode Island, was sponsored by the Rhode Island Tourism Division, now a significant player in the Department of Economic Development, and Johnson and Wales University, the largest hospitality school in the country. William Norman, President of the Travel Industry Association of America, brought the national perspective to the meeting.

At the state level, several weeks prior to the meeting, eight sub-committees were established to prepare ideas and issues that would be addressed at the statewide meeting.

One of the major problems of the field cited is the lack of recognition of the hospitality and tourist business as an industry. Because there are so many types of activities involved, from travel agent to tour guide, from restaurant to cab driver, from bar tender to innkeeper, it is difficult to single out.

Since it is not easily recognized as a unique field of study and career path, it was further recommended that schools do more to prepare students for this type of activity. To this end Johnson and Wales now has plans to work with a high school in Providence, drawing on its

current school experience in Newport.

There were many other recommendations, ranging from better signage to improved security, from providing a better self-image of the industry to doing a better job of marketing our product, from working with the other New England states on a regional basis to share information, marketing and promotion to a better identification of our physical, cultural, historic and entertainment resources that provide the reasons why anyone should visit the state.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to our state is

to make our citizens aware of what the Hospitality/Tourism business is, to recognize its impact on the economy, to know why we need to foster a spirit of friendliness to visitors to encourage them to return and to improve and enhance those resources we now have so that other Americans and foreign visitors will want to visit.

Chester E. Smolski is a professor of geography and director of Urban Studies at Rhode Island College