



2009 TOURISM & HOSPITALITY CONSORTIUM INDUSTRY SUMMIT REVIEW

More than 70 industry leaders from throughout Oregon listened intently as Kari Westlund, chair of the Oregon Tourism Commission, thanked them for devoting an entire day to discussing issues of importance to the tourism industry—and then reminded them why.

“These are very remarkable times, with big issues on the horizon,” Westlund told a full conference room at the Salem Conference Center recently. “The time is rife with great opportunity, lots of excitement and significant risk, as sweeping policy changes are introduced at the state and national levels.”

“This consortium was created to identify and support a leadership network, and we all need to engage in the responsibilities of that leadership.”

-- Kari Westlund, chair, Oregon Tourism Commission

“Ours is a very complex industry and now is the time to inspire understanding of its complexities. The people in this room form a cohesive powerhouse of energy—that’s you and I hope you feel it,” Westlund said to a rousing round of applause.

THE “ONE VOICE” POTENTIAL

The inaugural meeting of the Tourism & Hospitality Consortium Industry Summit was convened to discuss key industry issues in a challenging time. By exploring those issues together, consortium members have the opportunity to share strategic guidance—to speak with one voice on critical issues as the industry develops, grows and helps shape Oregon’s future. “I really feel that the vision of the consortium summit will solidify with what we do today,” Westlund said.

In brief welcoming remarks, Duncan Wyse, president of the Oregon Business Council, urged listeners to “think boldly” about how best to bring a shared image of Oregon into focus for the future. “Tourism is a job creator on its own,” he said, “but it’s also essentially the front door to the rest of the economy.”

PUTTING IT INTO PERSPECTIVE

The summit schedule was built around discussion of six topics of importance to the industry today: transportation, land use, public lands and environment, marketing, energy and the workforce. The topics were identified during a series of regional tourism and hospitality “town halls,” an ongoing discussion sponsored in part by the Tourism & Hospitality Consortium Steering Committee.

“These topic areas have percolated up through the town halls we’ve had so far,” said Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon, as he explained the day’s schedule: a brief overview of each topic by a subject matter expert, followed by small-group discussions to explore the issues in depth.

David Sheatsley, director of marketing research for the U.S. Travel Association, set the stage for the day’s discussions with his keynote talk on the state of the industry. His title slide was met with a collective groan from the audience: “The National Outlook...Look Out,” it read.

“The major point here is, if you didn’t like 2008, you’re not going to like 2009,” he said. Some things to look out for: the downward trend in business travel is intensifying; the outlook for air travel is up in the air; leisure travelers are aggressively looking for deals; and it’s no longer patriotic to travel for business.

But it’s not all bad news. After the national Marketing Outlook Forum was held in Oregon last October, attendees gave Portland a “phenomenally high” location score, Sheatsley said. And on a brand-new website for sustainable tourism, www.travelgreen.org, Oregon has more case studies posted than any other state.



THE HOT TOPICS

Summit participants received a briefing paper on each topic, as well as a high-level overview provided by Oregon industry leaders, before breaking up into small-group sessions to discuss the topic of their choice in more depth.

Here are a few topic highlights:

Transportation—Patrick Cooney, ODOT: “It’s kind of a mixed bag. We see a decreased revenue picture through 2013, but on the other hand, the federal government wants to give us money.” Stimulus funds should net the state about \$350 million over two years for transportation projects.

Land use—Darren Nichols, Department of Land Conservation and Development: “The conversation about planning issues is not unique, necessarily, but how we approach them is, and that’s a real asset for us. We don’t make the decisions—we set the stage for the decisions to be made. It’s an important distinction.”

Public lands/environment—Michael Pope, Department of Fish and Wildlife: The nationally recognized conservation strategy is the only statewide plan Oregon has. “We consider it a blueprint for the future, with volunteer strategies for six key issues.”

Marketing—Holly Macfee, Teresa O’Neill, Travel Oregon: “We need to stay the course. All of us have an incredible momentum built up, and we need to stay invested and top-of-mind for travelers.” Tactical price shifts are okay in the short term, but there is long-term harm in “cheapening” the Oregon experience.

Energy—Lou Torres, Oregon Department of Energy: Some travelers to Oregon are getting a 30,000-foot perspective on what’s happening to renewable energy production in the state. The prevalence of wind farms on the Columbia Gorge approach to Portland International Airport illustrate the tremendous growth in Oregon’s wind energy.

Workforce—Bill Perry, Oregon Restaurant Association: The hospitality industry’s ProStart program for high school students is a national model. “We place more kids in the workplace than any state.” Still, the lack of a four-year education program for tourism is a major gap in higher education.

BREAKING IT DOWN

The small group discussion was spirited, as people chose the topic dearest to their hearts. Marketing drew the biggest group, as people crowded around a table to discuss product development and strategies in an ailing economy. Another large group tackled the public lands and environment issue, throwing out ideas on how best to balancing tourism and habitat issues. For the group discussing transportation, money seemed to be the common theme. “There’s no money and we need a lot of it,” summarized a group member.

Finally, moderator Randy Harrington drew the discussions to a close. “We are right at the precipice of an opportunity to establish global best practices for what sustainable tourism practices can do to resuscitate an economy that was suffering,” he said. “Let’s keep working together throughout the year.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“The tourism and hospitality industry is at a great place in terms of leading the way to get us out of this recession - not by yourself, but with the economic stimulus you can provide sustaining and creating jobs, and the work we can do to actually grab market share from other states.”

-- Speaker of the House Dave Hunt, D-Clackamas County

“The bottom line is that this situation is going to force us to look at things fundamentally differently - how do we fund public services, how do we use our natural resources?”

-- Senator David Nelson, R-Pendleton

“Using Oregon’s Natural resources responsibly is the key to restoring the state’s economy and also to attracting visitors. We need to recapture our special places by building trails and infrastructure, and putting the parks back and making sure we have special places for people to come.”

-- Speaker Pro Tempore Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay

“We have an excellent opportunity during these hard times to look at different markets for travel and tourism, and we need to be very cautious about protecting the tourism tax.”

-- Representative Kevin Cameron, R-Salem