

OREGON PUBLIC BROADCASTING

What Season's Best in Oregon?

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By Rob Manning

PORTLAND, OR - Governor Ted Kulongoski has said he sees tourism as key to turning around Oregon's economy.

His trip to Japan this week to stump for renewing nonstop flights between that country and PDX is just one example.

Not only is tourism one of the state's top industries, but Kulongoski maintains that visitors are crucial to getting other sectors of the economy moving. But, some in the industry think the state's plan for boosting tourism could use some improvement.

Governor Kulongoski recently called himself the new cheerleader for Oregon's tourism industry - and said he especially wants to recruit out-of-state visitors. To do that, Kulongoski told representatives of the hospitality industry he supports a bill now in the state legislature that would direct a one-percent increase in hotel room taxes statewide to fund a national advertising campaign.

Ted Kulongoski: "If I told anyone in this room, you could invest a dollar and get three back, you wouldn't just say that was a good idea - you'd say it's a great idea. Let's do that. And that's why I support this increase in a one-percent hotel room tax to see that we can be the shot in the arm for this industry."

And Kulongoski is looking to focus the marketing push around a particular season - summer, much like other states have successfully done.

Ted Kulongoski: "New England owns the fall season. Likewsie, Florida owns spring break. And, Colorado, the state of the Rockies, owns winter. There's one left "

Dave Tragethon: "I would not surrender winter to Colorado."

Dave Tragethon is the marketing director for Mount Hood Meadows.

Dave Tragethon: "Particularly if you include March and April. With Timberline you get summer skiing as well. And our early season - we get Utah-like January powder before Christmas in Oregon, on Mount Hood. Sometimes it doesn't get here as early as we'd like, but when it's here, it's as good as anywhere."

Tragethon says there are plenty of vacant hotel rooms in the winter, while during the summer, Oregon hotels and resorts are close to capacity.

According to the Oregon Tourism Commission, coastal resort towns like Seaside enjoyed full

hotels and convention bookings last summer, despite the economy.

Lisa Noah with the Newport chamber of commerce, says summer business is what worries the industry the least.

Lisa Noah: "We're a 'seasonal tourism' industry, we have a lot of visitors who come during the summer, but they haven't quite found us during the off-season. They really need to come out to see the absolutely gorgeous winter storms you won't see anyplace else."

Mount Hood Meadows' officials would also like to see more visitors at other times of the year. But rather than an advertising focus on summer, Meadows would like to see an emphasis on Oregon as a year-round destination. And they would like to get the go ahead on a plan to expand the Cooper Spur ski area into an all seasons resort.

The idea faces opposition from environmental groups and some area residents. But Meadows general manager Dave Riley points to the county's ten-and-a-half percent unemployment rate - and the county commission's support - as reasons to move forward.

Dave Riley: "The job situation is acute for our local community. There's a tremendous number of people who need year-round employment. We've got 50 year-round employees, in the winter that goes up to 1,000. We'd like to push the year-round number closer to that number. That's one of the driving forces of developing Cooper Spur."

Hood River is just one of many counties across the state looking closely at the governor's proposed tourism tax.

On the coast, hotel room taxes are a mainstay of the local revenue. In January, Newport voters passed a one-percent local tax to help market the city's anchor attraction - the Oregon Coast Aquarium.

Acting president Pat Helbling says advertising the aquarium will help the whole city.

Pat Helbling: "It's really targeted to us, it factors out to \$200,000 for two and a half years, but part of the agreement is that we will be marketing the greater Newport area as well. And that's really easy for us to do."

But Helbling is hesitant to endorse the proposal to raise hotel taxes statewide.

That's because as it's currently written, House Bill 22-67 would prevent local governments from raising room taxes any further to pay for non-"tourism related" needs.

Lisa Noah with the chamber of commerce, says her concern stems from how that phrase is interpreted.

Lisa Noah: "We need to pay for additional police, fire, emergency that are used by our visitors, the heavy traffic on our roads so some of the money should go to those needs, where those in the tourism industry don't see that as tourism-related."

Opposition from chambers of commerce and local governments have kept the bill in the House Revenue Committee where it lacks the votes to reach the House floor.

Kulongoski has voiced his support of the bill, but hasn't specified what provisions he wants included.

For now, tourist attractions around the state are busily preparing for summer, with the nation's 5th smallest tourism ad budget.

Kulongoski meanwhile, wants to make sure that once travelers learn about Oregon, they have a way to get here. Earlier this year, Lufthansa and Mexicana airlines became the most recent carriers to offer direct flights out of PDX. This week, the governor is hoping to convince a Japanese airline to do the same.

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