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Coupeville, a quiet waterfront community, is a great destination for those interested in art, history and nature. The town still reflects the aura of a frontier seaport from the time when Puget Sound was first being settled.

Tourism: Growing a year-round economic engine for Island County

Tourism bureau takes strategic approach to promoting islands

By Carolyn Tamler

WITH SEVEN STATE parks, lots of picturesque towns and sites to see, beaches to explore, and events and festivals to attend, Whidbey and Camano islands offer a feast

for the tourist. Island County has become home to a myriad of small businesses, local farmers, artists and craftspeople, and for most businesses to thrive, they need tourist

dollars throughout the year. And, tourist dollars are substantial: According to a report prepared by Washington State Tourism, visitors to the two islands spent \$136.6 million in 2006.

RoseAnn Alspektor, marketing coordinator for Whidbey-Camano Tourism, and Chet Ross, Chairman of Island County 2-percent Joint Tourism Committee and President of the Freeland Chamber of Commerce, have been meeting with committee members since 2005 to work on a plan to build tourism year-round for Island County. Alspektor points out, "While we need to promote tourism throughout the year, we need to especially focus on increasing overnight tour-

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ism during the shoulder season, which includes the months from October through April.”

2-PERCENT TOURISM TAX

Alspektor’s job and Whidbey-Camano Tourism’s marketing budget is funded directly from the state’s 2 percent room tax on lodging to pay for the development of tourism in each of Washington’s 39 counties. Originally, a 2 percent tax was added to the sales tax with this money going back to support tourism activities in the cities and counties where the taxes were generated. In 2000, the state Legislature approved an additional 2 percent lodging tax to fund tourism marketing. The taxes are collected by the accommodations and submitted to the state; these funds are then returned to the counties from where they were collected to be used for tourism marketing. Alspektor’s primary responsibilities include coordinating activities and programs with the Island County Joint Tourism Committee that will

generate more tourist dollars coming into the businesses of Island County.

The mission of the 18-member Island County Joint Tourism Committee is to strengthen the county’s economy by promoting Whidbey and Camano islands as

“Clearly we don’t have to promote summer tourism to our islands; where we do need to focus is on increasing overnight tourism during the shoulder seasons.”

RoseAnn Alspektor,
Whidbey-Camano Tourism

year-round travel destinations, with emphasis on shoulder-season visitation. Additionally, the group aims

to respect the islands’ “authentic and diverse ecosystems, environments, lifestyles and cultures.”

The advertising plan includes several ad campaigns to be used throughout the year leveraging the trend to vacation locally due to rising costs. The campaign themes include: “Find What YOU Treasure,” “The Shortest Distance to Far Away,” “Washington’s Treasured Islands” and “One-Tank Getaways.”

ISLAND COUNTY INCREASINGLY KNOWN AS A PRIME DESTINATION

The tourism committee has been tracking the origins of their information requests for several years. Requests from domestic and international origins for the period from July 2006 to July 2007 show a large portion of the domestic requests come from Washington state, but an almost equal number came from California, and a significant number of requests came from several states, including Oregon, Texas, Florida, Arizona and



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-Bill Ronhaar, Manager
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Bill Ronhaar is pictured here with our Copier Specialist, Deanna DeVries McDougale.

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The streets of historic downtown Langley are lined with book stores, antique shops, clothing boutiques, cafes and restaurants.

New York.

Internationally, Canada is the prime source of requests for information about Island County. In fact, Canada represents nearly three-quarters of all international requests. After Canada,

the United Kingdom, England and Puerto Rico have the highest levels of representation.

Since July 2005, the leads received from tourism committee marketing efforts indicate that the major regional

target markets for promoting the shoulder seasons are Eastern Washington; British Columbia; the Seattle/Puget Sound area; Tri-Cities; Portland, Ore.; the Northeast Coast; and, increasingly, Asia. The Seattle/Puget Sound area is bombarded with destination marketing in print, radio and television. Many of the tourist competitors, including the San Juan Islands, Grays Harbor, Ocean Shores, Lake Chelan, Leavenworth, the Olympic Peninsula, Bellingham, Anacortes and Victoria, are advertising on a year-round basis.

NEW AND IMPROVED WEB SITE

Current industry data finds that 70 percent of travelers purchase their reservations online. To capture that

Top strategic goals

The Island County Joint Tourism Committee developed goals for improving tourism for Whidbey and Camano islands, including these three top strategies:

1. Increase shoulder-season overnight lodging visitation by targeting leisure travelers, family road trips, sports enthusiasts and events, business travelers, meeting planners and destination getaways from Eastern Washington, British Columbia, Seattle/Puget Sound area, Portland, Ore., and international markets.

2. Participate in regional activities designed to educate the Island County communities, government officials and state legislators regarding the importance of tourism as an economic development strategy for the islands.

3. Develop proactive marketing activities leading up to the 2010 Olympics and beyond. The 2010 Olympic Games and the associated Paralympics scheduled for locations in Whistler and Vancouver, B.C., offer opportunities for Washington and other Pacific Northwest states to enhance their tourism industries and generate other travel-related business development.



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online audience, Whidbey-Camano Tourism and the local chambers are working in partnership.

Island County's official tourism Web site (www.WhidbeyCamanoIslands.com) is in the process of being revamped this year with a focus on storytelling, events and attractions. It will include a vibrant social networking component that allows people to share their photos and stories about visiting Whidbey and Camano islands. The plan is to remove business listing redundancies with the six Island County chambers of commerce Web sites, and, instead, drive Web visits to the chambers for more detailed information about lodging, dining and other tourism-support businesses.

To date, the six chambers manage and maintain their individual Web sites, which focus on members' businesses and local events. Each Web site is unique in terms of navigation features and depth of content. It is hoped that the new tourism Web site, with an emphasis on directing traffic to the chambers, will



Langley Marina consists of 41 slips and can accommodate boats up to 35 feet. The marina is only a short walk from the town's main business district.

encourage them to upgrade their sites to contain a similar navigation feel to make it easy for online visitors to locate the lodging, dining and other information they are seeking.

STRATEGY BUILDS TOURISM ON ISLANDS

The tourism committee developed a plan for a strategic direction in 2007-2008. The primary objective of



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Built in 1935, Deception Pass Bridge is the northern gateway to Whidbey Island.

this strategy is to market Whidbey and Camano islands as destinations for overnight travel with a focus on the October to April timeframe. The committee also recognized that “Island County” as a brand caused confusion because visitors and journalists think that Island County includes the San Juans and Anacortes. A primary goal is to shift awareness from the single “Island County” name to encompass the many names and destinations on Camano and Whidbey islands.

The new advertising campaign is promoting the recently designated Whidbey Island Scenic Isle

Way and Gateway Monument Project. The construction of the gateway monuments and placement of the Isle Way logos will begin late this summer or early fall. SR 525 and SR 20 have both been designed as Scenic Byways and are now part of the Cascade Loop. The Regional Transportation Planning Organization approved proposed gateway monument designs at three recommended access points to Whidbey Island: Clinton, Deception Pass and Keystone.

Spring and fall advertising campaigns will utilize print, radio and/or television to target Vancouver, British Columbia; Seattle/Puget Sound; Spokane; Tri-Cities and Portland markets and the international markets in preparation for the 2010 Vancouver, B.C., Olympics. In the Puget Sound area, the promotion will emphasize “One-Tank Getaways.”

LEVERAGING REGIONAL EVENTS

A key tourism strategy is to participate in promotional opportunities presented by regional events and initiatives such as Skate America in October 2008 in Everett, the SnoGold 2010 Olympics organized by the Snohomish Tourism Bureau, and The Cascade Loop Alliance.

Skate America, part of the International Skating Union Grand Prix Series, is the premier international figure skating competition held in the United States each year. Thousands of visitors are expected to come for the October event, and with Whidbey a short ferry trip away, Whidbey-Camano Tourism hopes to draw attendees to the islands.

The Washington State 2010 Task Force’s impact study has examined the scope of opportunity the 2010 Winter Olympics will bring and is working to implement and support regional plans to maximize the potential benefits. SnoGold 2010 is designed to help Snohomish County benefit from the Winter Olympics in British Columbia. Island County is expected to benefit



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from the activities of SnoGold, as well as the Olympic games themselves.

The byways that comprise the Cascade Loop Scenic Highway (Stevens Pass Greenway, North Cascades Scenic Highway, Whidbey Scenic Isleway) participated in a workshop in May, under the sponsorship of Washington State Scenic Byways and Washington State Tourism, to explore if, and how, these byways can partner with each other to maximize resources, work toward joint goals and increase visibility while maintaining distinct individual entities. The outcome of the meeting was the formation of a byways alliance that will work toward the ultimate goal of pursuing a National Scenic Byway designation for the entire route, in order to be eligible for additional federal money.

SEEING RESULTS

Since 2000, the tourism committee has been tracking changes in lodging and sales taxes revenues. To date, both of these revenues have been increasing an average rate of 6 percent per year. Comparing January through June 2006 to the same period in 2007, sales tax and room tax revenues increased 18 percent.

When Alspektor was hired two and a half years ago, she initiated a system to capture ad response leads into an electronic database for tracking and analysis. Since 2005, there were more than 15,000 leads resulting from the tourism committee's advertising and public relations projects.

Online traffic in the form of unique visitors to the tourism Web site has doubled. Furthermore, media recognition of the names of the two islands has increased due to a focus on branding the Whidbey and Camano names rather than the previous branding focus of "Do Nothing Here."

Travel writers continue to visit the county to write stories for major media outlets. Island County has received 13 full pages in the just-released "Northwest Best Places Guidebook," which is published every two years. This publication is one of the key references for travelers. There were also 27 full pages of Whidbey Island cover-

age and eight pages of Camano Island coverage in the just-released guidebook "Washington: An Explorer's Guide" by Denise Feinberg.

ISLAND COUNTY IS TOURIST FRIENDLY

Business owners in Island County are aware of the number of off-island visitors who patronize their establishments. The Joint Tourism Committee

has set many strategies in motion to promote visitors to the islands and to encourage Whidbey and Camano businesses to be as customer-oriented, family friendly and tourist friendly as possible. The payoff is continued vitality for these small communities. ■

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