

The Day

Tourism summit looks to rebound from funding cuts

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Mashantucket - Campaigning for tourism funding is the way Colorado rebounded from a slashed marketing budget nearly two decades ago, and Connecticut needs to do the same.

That was the message presented by Dr. Bill Siegel, chairman and founder of marketing research firm Longwoods International of Toronto, at Thursday's Connecticut Conference on Tourism.

Connecticut is "the next Colorado," Siegel said, the only state in the country without publicly allocated money for tourism marketing.

Colorado was in that position 17 years ago, when an anti-tax activist convinced voters to jettison funding for tourism. Here in Connecticut, the governor and General Assembly have allocated only \$1 for funding to market the state's tourist attractions and image.

About 240 people from inns, hotels, colleges, publishing companies, and tourist attractions browsed a smattering of booths at the conference at the MGM Grand at Foxwoods, then had lunch, sitting around tables where the impatiens centerpieces were topped with single dollar bills.

"You're the ones that have to get your act together and take it to the legislature," Siegel said. "What happens when the state stops marketing? Only you have the answer."

That answer depends on showing decision-makers how tourism drives a substantial return on investment, Siegel said. Colorado went from 14th to first place in destination marketing between 1987 and 1993 because it revamped its image to emphasize "more than mountains," from "zoos without fences" and "museums without walls" to winter resorts available in summer, Siegel said.

But after voters upended funding by portraying it as a tax, Colorado's tourism industry was left with the publicly spread belief that marketing tourism could and should be "left to private sector," Siegel said.

The state bounced back by hiring Longwoods, which had successfully marketed the Colorado in the past, to write a white paper building a case that the industry's return on investment warranted spending money on marketing. After a small \$5 million 2000 budget helped lift the state's image, it was quadrupled in 2006 to nearly \$20 million, and Colorado is back in the top 10 nationally as a tourist destination, Siegel said.

"Marketing certainly works for Colorado," Siegel told the crowd. "What about you? You're in the hole."

Yet Connecticut is somewhat better off today than Colorado was then, he added, because the \$1 placeholder keeps tourism marketing as a line-item in the budget and Connecticut still has staff in its Culture and Tourism Commission.

He recommended not assuming that tourists will "come anyway," without marketing; being accountable; and speaking with a unified voice.

Karen Senich, the executive director of Connecticut's Commission on Culture & Tourism, said speaking collectively as a state will be key to any funding rebound.

"I think yesterday the tourism industry hit its bottom," Senich told the audience, referring to the late-night passage of the 2011 budget plan. "I think today is the first day we'll go forward ... to work together to make sure the state and our elected officials, our towns and our regional representatives understand the importance of this industry to the state."

That task will be daunting, she added, because "it's like beating your head against a wall. You go up to the Capitol and they just don't get it. They say you're not essential, but I say, we pay for essential services. We need to educate the legislature. We need your help up there. I think today is the first day."