

Tourism survival at center of event

By James Mosher

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Marketing is essential for tourism, whether done by state government or through personal networking, participants in an industry conference said.

"I'm not here as a lobbyist," said Bill Siegel, CEO of Longwoods International, the featured lunch speaker at the Connecticut Conference on Tourism held Thursday at MGM Grand at Foxwoods. "It's just that I know that tourism marketing works."

Siegel's presentation was titled "What Happens When a State Stops Marketing Itself." He contrasted Connecticut with what he called "The Rise and Fall of Colorado Tourism." Colorado went from No. 14 to No. 1 among U.S. states for summer vacations through aggressive government-backed efforts from 1987 to 1993. Colorado fell to No. 17 by 2004, losing \$2 billion in annual revenue, after anti-tax sentiment knocked out government tourism efforts.

Instead of lambasting anti-tax efforts, Siegel criticized the tourism industry for failing to acknowledge people's concerns about taxes and government spending. He warns Connecticut tourism businesses to be more cognizant of the overall economic landscape.

"Their biggest mistake was talking about themselves," Siegel said of Colorado tourism operators.

Yet personal appeals are fine when drumming up business in state, he said. Eastern Connecticut tourism businesses were doing just that at the conference, connecting with widespread resources including the Eastern Regional Tourism District.

The district is looking to market New London and Windham counties through a single website — Mystic.org. The site is absorbing MysticCountry.com with the combined entity slated to go public June 1.

Teaming up

District Executive Director Edward Dombroskas and his small team has the difficult task of holding together a large, diverse coalition that includes the bright lights of the Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos and Windham County's Quiet Corner.

A Windham County article in the most recent issue of Mystic Country magazine is proof of growing team spirit.

"I'm thrilled about it," said Jean de Smet, a former Windham first selectman and member of the Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood Association. "Northeastern Connecticut has been suffering to get recognition for many years."

De Smet and fellow Windham representatives visited the Peter Pan Bus table, inquiring about the possibility of bringing people from Mystic to the Willimantic 3rd Thursday festivals that will resume later this month.

Norwich leaders are thinking along similar lines, with the Norwich Arts Council and Rose City Renaissance planning a day of street performances on July 3. A recent \$28,500 grant from the Sachem Fund will help with that and other arts offerings.

Diversifying and new alliances are key to tourism businesses, especially after state government reduced its tourism marketing budget to a single dollar.

"We've got to find ways to make extra money these days," said Gail Beecher, who has added herb farming and sales at her Roseledge Bed & Breakfast in Preston.

New psychology in dealing with legislators is also necessary, said Karen Senich, director of the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism.

"They say 'you're non-essential,'" she said. "But we pay for those essential services."