

Planning future tourism promotion

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

Sisters' approach to promoting tourism is under review.

In response to the Sisters Country Vision Plan, the City has been gearing up to address Strategy One for a Prosperous Sisters; to make Sisters a four-season tourist and visitor destination by strategically increasing the number of shoulder season and winter events and attractions, such as performances, festivals, retreats, educational speaker series, trainings, and outdoor sports tournaments. The Action Plan calls for the creation of a Sisters Events Committee with a paid coordinator.

As of June 30, 2020, the contract between the City and the Chamber of Commerce naming the Chamber to act as the Sisters Visitors Bureau will expire. On January 22, Chamber executive director, Judy Trego, approached the City Council and made a request for \$250,000 in additional funds for next fiscal year, above and beyond the current fixed annual contract amount of \$250,000.

The money given to the Chamber comes from the transient room tax (TRT) collected on overnight guest stays in local hotels/motels, bed and breakfasts, and short-term rentals. By state law, a certain percentage of the TRT is required to be spent on tourist-related activities and promotion. The \$250,000 a year to the Chamber is more than the percentage required by law.

Rather than try to craft a long-term contract with the Chamber at this point in time when the events/tourism/visitor committee is still in the planning stage, the Council is considering a one-year extension of the current contract at its current \$250,000.

The City believed there was a clear need to engage the Chamber in a conversation around the future of tourism promotion in Sisters. In February and March, City Manager Cory Misley and City Councilor Michael Preedin held three meetings with Trego, Nick Beasley, Chamber board president, and other staff.

Misley reported that he thinks the City and Chamber have come to an understanding on a general direction for the near future. The discussions covered many topics including information gathering, Sisters Country Vision, and looking to the future of the partnership/contract.

There were a few key takeaways that should be

central to the direction for a short-term contract extension:

- Create a tourism/visitor committee made up of stakeholders such as the Chamber, the City, lodging providers, event coordinators, and city residents. The committee can help guide decisions/investments regarding the TRT and tourism in Sisters.

- Create a strategic plan around tourism/visitor promotion and investments. The committee would be the key stakeholder group informing this effort. A consultant would be retained to lead/manage the effort. This strategic plan would be a longer term (three to five years) framework to guide year-to-year decisions regarding investments in tourism promotion, events, and facilities. Furthermore, it could contemplate many scenarios including contingency planning and resiliency for unforeseen circumstances (wildfire, pandemics, natural disasters).

An estimate of the time needed for this is three to six months and could begin soon after the committee is created, meaning the plan could

be completed approximately this time next year.

Given the need to assemble the committee, which will create the strategic plan, there is not currently enough new data/information to make a long-term decision regarding the TRT and the contract between the City and the Chamber.

With the current shutdown caused by the coronavirus, the TRT funds collected this year will most likely be negatively impacted. For this fiscal year (2019-20), the budget projections for TRT funds collected was \$674,000, but Finance Director Joe O'Neill has reduced that projection downward to \$556,000 due to the coronavirus. He is projecting \$500,000 for FY 2020-21 due to the coronavirus.

Misley reported to the Council that the Chamber understands the process and appreciated the fact that the amount for next year wouldn't be reduced. The overall goal shared by both groups is to "make Sisters better." The \$250,000 is yet to be approved by the Budget Committee which will be meeting in early June.

Sparks will fly!

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Spring sports season is canceled

After Governor Kate Brown's announcement on Wednesday that Oregon schools will be closed to in-person learning for the remainder of the school year, the Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) has canceled all remaining spring activities and state championships.

"Today's heart-wrenching decision is difficult for all members of the OSAA family," said Peter Weber, OSAA Executive Director. "We empathize with students and school communities, especially our graduating seniors, but recognize that these cancellations will allow our collective focus to remain where it's most needed at this time — on the health and safety of all Oregonians."

"We had maintained hope for an abbreviated spring season to help bring a sense of normalcy to these uncertain times," said Weber. "Now more than ever we need to apply the lessons

learned through participation in education-based activities — teamwork, sacrifice, resilience — and play our role in adhering to the public health guidelines. We all look forward to the day when we play again."

Current OSAA policies prohibiting the use of school facilities and coaches from organizing or directing workouts and practices remain in effect until further notice. The OSAA Executive Board will meet in the coming weeks to discuss policies for summer activities, along with academic eligibility concerns for Fall 2020 that have been expressed by member schools and families.

The OSAA and our member schools are currently awaiting guidance from Oregon Department of Education on credit attainment for ninth- through 11th-grade students through the state's Distance Learning for All initiative.

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