

MODEL: City to shift how it handles tourism

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an effort to be transparent, Council has been reviewing all public contracts. The revised Deschutes County Sheriff, Republic Services, and economic development contracts are examples of recent negotiations that benefit residents. Council now has time to examine our TLT use, goals, and delivery mechanism,” Connolly told *The Nugget*.

In the spring of 2021, the City initiated a visitor opportunity survey, destination scan, and destination management project with Kristin Dahl, founder and CEO of Crosscurrent Collective. That project culminated in a presentation in October that can be found on the City website under Destination Management Presentation.

At their January 26 workshop, Council heard presentations from Kevney Dugan, president/CEO for Visit Bend, and Jeff Knapp, executive director for Visit McMinnville, on their organizations, communities, and insights regarding destination management.

Council President Connolly provided her thoughts regarding the presentations.

“As a resident, I was pleased to hear that the DMO model emphasizes livability for residents while attracting visitors who share our cultural and environmental values. It was eye-opening to discover that transient lodging tax (TLT) funds could be used to provide future amenities that benefit locals and visitors. The focus on creating a symbiotic relationship where the community benefits from the TLT was also educational.

“As an elected official, I was excited to see the fiscal accountability of TLT funds and the cultural shift designed to attract visitors

who share our small-town values and love of nature,” Connolly said. “DMOs do not focus on bringing massive numbers of people to visit an area; instead, the focus is on attracting visitors who want an authentic experience. In our case, it is a small-town Western experience based on our decades-old historical events such as the Rodeo, Quilt Show, Folk Festival, and Harvest Faire.

“...the DMO model emphasizes livability for residents ... — Nancy Connolly

“Our research shows that a majority of visitors come for an outdoor experience. With a DMO, emphasis could be placed on sustaining our natural resources while attracting year-round visitors who share our social and environmental values. In other words, we are not Vegas, and a DMO would target specific visitors to enhance our livability, not destroy it by forcing their values on our residents.”

At this point in time, the Council and staff are looking for opportunities for workforce development, protecting natural resources, being environmentally sensitive, and assuring the quality of life that attracted people to Sisters.

Destination marketing involves much more than just advertising Sisters in other locations. Marketing is conducted strategically to certain demographics and interest groups. The City already has some targeted markets with rodeo fans, quilters, and music lovers. Outdoor recreationists come to enjoy all that nature around Sisters provides. All those visitors could enjoy richer experiences with local businesses and organizations collaborating to provide

unique experiences.

The visitor economy is basically tied to everything that happens in Sisters, and the residents, as well as the visitors, can benefit from facility improvements, coordinated programming, and stewardship of our surroundings. Marketing can attract visitors who want to give back to the place they visit, which builds a relationship and investment in their destination. With destination management, the goal isn't more visitors, but visitors who care about and are committed to Sisters, making them more likely to make return visits and stay longer.

Council has asked staff to look at existing DMO models regarding their non-profit status, funding mechanisms and amounts, board composition, job descriptions, and how DMOs are held accountable to the public and City. This material will be used to prepare Council for upcoming goal setting and 2022-23 budget processes.

As City Manager Cory Misley stated, “We are only at the beginning of the beginning regarding a DMO.”

He likened the process to building a boat. The City can make the blueprints based on community input, build the boat, and supply it with resources and maps, but eventually the boat gets put out to sea. In other words, the DMO would be responsible for managing tourism.

On Wednesday, February 9, at 5:30 p.m., the City Council will hold a workshop where they will be exploring the DMO concept — what it is and how it differs from what is being done now. The workshop is open to the public with attendance either in person or via ZOOM. The link is available on the agenda, which is located on the City website under Agendas and Meetings. All in-person attendees are required to wear a mask.

Focusing on livability

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

In a recent interview regarding destination management, Council President Nancy Connolly addressed several adjacent topics.

• How might a destination management organization (DMO) be paid for?

“In the '80s, the state legislature established a state lodging tax, the Transient Lodging Tax (TLT). ‘Heads in beds’ pay a nightly tax which goes to the city or county where the lodging occurred. There are restrictions on how the funds are spent on tourism and/or used for the general fund. In the past, the City has turned TLT funds over to the Chamber to use for tourism promotion. With a DMO, allocation of TLT could be focused on supporting a year-round program that correlates with our community values and potentially providing a future community amenity.”

• What should residents understand about destination management?

“All City Councilors live within the city limits; we understand the balance between tourism and livability. During the past eight years, Council has addressed

the following issues to help maintain our quality of life:

1. Placed restrictions on short-term rentals so that our neighborhoods remain neighborhoods, not “de facto hotels” with increased traffic, parked cars, parties. This policy has helped prevent long-term rentals from becoming short-term rentals, thus maintaining employee housing availability.

2. Adopted policy limiting the number of city-wide events that can occur during peak tourist season to ensure residents have access to public parks, and mitigate traffic.

3. Placed restrictions on street closures for events to ensure mobility of residents.

4. Reduced speed on all city streets to help ensure safer streets for pedestrians and make enforcement easier.” Connolly concluded: “Creating a DMO gives Council another way to help create a year-round program that benefits residents and tourists. It would ensure we reach visitors with shared cultural values. It gives us the ability to help preserve our natural resources by using future TLT funds on specific projects and allows us to reinvest in the community to mutually benefit residents and visitors.



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