

Study looks at what coastal tourists value most

Traffic, lodging costs are concerns

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

When international travelers come to the North Coast, they are enamored with the nature that surrounds them and the Oregonians they meet. But a few more signs telling them how to get around wouldn't hurt.

The observations are a part of recent study by Travel Oregon and the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement that looks at who visits the North Coast and what they like to do while they are here.

About 750 visitors from Astoria to Pacific City were surveyed in August in cities and state parks about what they felt were the region's greatest assets and weaknesses.

The information is aimed to inform tourism leaders on how to make tourism sustainable environmentally and economically through a multiyear rural tourism studio program.

"It gives us the opportunity to understand who is there and

what they value there," said Linea Gagliano, Travel Oregon communications director.

In many ways, the study shows what one would expect. About half of the visitors reported being from outside of Oregon but from the United States, with about another 30 percent coming from Portland — but almost all of them are coming for leisure.

About 80 percent of visitors come for entertainment, including restaurants, shops and breweries. About 70 percent of people are then interested in getting active with land-based activities like hiking and about 60 percent in water-based activities like beach walks. Only about 27 percent reported dabbling in arts and culture.

The ocean and general natural beauty was predictably the biggest visitor draw. One of the region's greatest assets is its "vibe", as many commented on the area's ability to "offer them a calm, quiet, and relaxing escape from their busy lives."

While about 75 percent reported having a pleasurable time on the North Coast, the study also illuminated constraints that, if left unaddressed, could affect the visitor experience. About a quarter of



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Visitors to Ecola State Park admire the view looking south toward Cannon Beach.

participants said they anticipate not returning, and in varying degrees cited issues such as too much traffic, a lack of parking, crowds and high costs of lodging as reasons why.

Good hosts

Outdoor recreation continues to be one of the fastest-growing travel markets in the United States. On the Oregon Coast, outdoor recreation accounted for about 10 percent of all visitor spending in 2017, amounting to about \$200 million.

Accommodating the outdoor recreation market not

only has room for growth, but also means attracting the type of visitor the destination marketing organization is looking for — someone who tends to stay multiple nights and spends more when they are here, Gagliano said.

While the North Coast is known for outdoor opportunities, and the report found that visitors enjoy the outdoor experience, signs and infrastructure could improve.

Despite having about half of respondents surveyed in state parks, only 7 percent reported camping. Cycling, one of Oregon's fastest-growing

outdoor recreation industries, didn't make the list at all.

The findings are likely not due to lack of interest, but lack of certain infrastructure, Travel Oregon Outdoor Recreation Specialist Stephen Hatfield said.

"Camping is low compared with the state, but that's probably because they're at capacity," he said.

Safety issues on U.S. Highway 101 and the general lack of opportunities for mountain biking on the coast in comparison to the rest of the state is likely the reason for little cycling.

Recommendations in the report include development of new recreation and camping areas, as well as better publicizing existing underutilized areas to help disperse crowds and limit environmental degradation.

Making smaller changes like adding bike lanes, lighted pedestrian crossings and adding more cautionary signs would also aid not just recreation, but overall congestion issues for locals and visitors.

Diversity

Some of the congestion issues could be addressed by better information about activities — a concern especially expressed by international travelers.

Several visitors commented on the difficulty they had with finding information about attractions, activities and events, suggesting more can be done to elevate lesser-known attractions.

Some visitors are also looking for more diversity. Between 19 and 23 percent of respondents said new events, different restaurants and shopping locations and activities would encourage them to visit the North Coast more frequently, and took issue with the limited hours of local shops.



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Sand blows across a dune in Cannon Beach.

Foredune plan is headed to council

Dunes from Page 1A

The commission added an extra foot after learning FEMA does not account for climate change when calculating these guidelines, and based the change on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's estimate that sea level could rise by 1½ feet in the most extreme climate scenario by 2040.

But the commission recommended these changes with one significant condition: the City Council should question whether grading for views should be done at all.

"Dune grading has always kind of been this foregone conclusion," commissioner Lisa Kerr said. "I've never been comfortable with this goal, and I feel like we've been just working around this for the past year."

Commissioners have tangled with this idea for months, even considering at some points to recommend the issue be put out to a vote in a ballot measure to reach a conclusion.

Commissioner Joe Bernt joined Kerr in her concerns, saying he felt part of the reason it has taken more than a year to come up with a recommended plan stems from the commission's base hesitancy about

whether they support grading for views at all.

"We've been lobbied to death," Bernt said, referring to Breakers Point residents in favor of dune grading. "And we still have never gotten to the main issue of this conflict."

The condition, which was introduced at Tuesday's meeting for the first time, would require a major change in the comprehensive plan if the City Council chooses to consider it.

It could come as a pleasant surprise for groups like Friends of the Dunes, who have long argued grading for views compromises a critical bulwark against storm-damage and damages plants and habitat. It could also come as a blow to the Breakers Point Homeowners Association — the area in Cannon Beach most disproportionately affected by sand accretion.

Dozens of homeowners testified for months to the planning commission about the effects of sand inundation, and how those who bought homes at Breakers Point were sold property under the idea code allowed the ability to maintain beach access and view.

Public hearings on the subject will be reopened when the City Council chooses to review the recommendation.

History center could acquire school

School from Page 1A

The building, which has sat vacant at the north end of town since the school was closed in 2013, has long been an object of desire for the city, which has discussed buying it as some form of event or community center on and off for years.

The Clatsop-Nehalem Confederated Tribes has also shown interest in preserving the unique building as a cultural landmark. It is one of four buildings the district is attempting to sell as it continues to build a new campus out of the tsunami inundation zone.

Elaine Trucke, the museum's executive director, said she first began thinking about the museum buying the property after reading an article about the school a couple of years ago.

Though the building sits in a zone that limits uses to community buildings that serve an educational or cultural purpose, she feared its location near the waterfront could possibly attract a developer that would eventually tear down the iconic dome-shaped gymnasium. Preserving the area is also historically and culturally



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The gymnasium at the Cannon Beach Elementary School.

significant, as it sits upon what was once the home of a bustling Native American village named NeCus.

She also sees potential for it to be an affordable community gathering space for nonprofits and other large community events.

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool to have a cultural center?'" she said. "We wanted it to be something historic the community could enjoy."

As a private nonprofit, Trucke also saw an opportunity for the museum to buy the property for community benefit without possibly burdening taxpayers with higher

property taxes.

"If the city buys it, then it's on the taxpayers, and they've already got the school bond, other bonds," she said. "What if we could do this through the private sector?"

The board discussed buying the property for more than a year, and officially sent an offer of \$400,000 in September. It was based on a similar offer made by the city of Cannon Beach a few years ago, Trucke said.

If the sale is finalized, Trucke hopes to work with the Greater Ecola Natural Area, a group that has long advocated for the school to

be a cultural center, to renovate the space to honor the history of both the tribes and the elementary school, introduce new trails adjoining the park and creating more parking.

Whether the sale is finalized and plans for renovation will be largely dependent on inspection reports, Trucke said, which will lay out how much renovation work will be needed to bring the abandoned building back up to code. The cost of interior and exterior renovations would be about \$371,000, according to a 2016 estimate.

"We're a healthy organization, but this is a big deal for us," Trucke said.

Once a purchase agreement is in hand, Trucke said a handful of private grant foundations have agreed to pay the down payment and part of the renovation costs. She hopes to finance continuing costs through local fundraising. Opening the doors could take between two to five years.

"I'm delighted it will continue to be a community-based place that celebrates the history of the tribe in the area, and a continued gathering place for the citizens of Cannon Beach," Roley said.

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