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## EDITORIALS

# Statewide Promotion

### Michigan, tourism industry must work together to attract out-of-state visitors

December 18, 2005

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Michigan spends so little on travel promotion you might think it wants to keep secret the state's beaches and sand dunes, snowmobile trails and trout streams, museums and historical sites.

In fact, tightwad practices become a self-fulfilling prophecy: 60% of leisure travel here is by Michiganders. So when other sectors of the economy tank, so does tourism.

Back in 1990, when James Blanchard was governor, the state's tourism department had a \$13.5-million budget, equivalent to about \$20 million in 2005

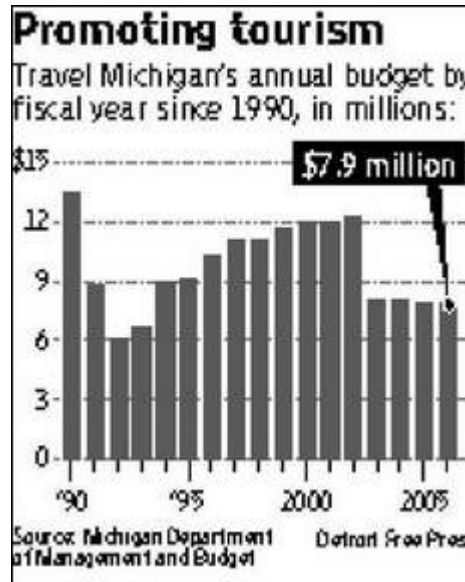
dollars. Even in the flush years of the late 1990s, tourism spending never returned to that level. Now, with tight state finances, the Travel Michigan budget has remained at a scant \$7.9 million for four years.

The state ranks sixth in the nation in the number of establishments that offer accommodations -- but 35th in sales per establishment and at the bottom in occupancy rates, according to statistics compiled by Michigan State University Extension.

So there's plenty of room, and rooms, to make some big gains in the travel and tourism industry by reeling in more out-of-staters -- ideally helping to bolster Michigan's economy while the manufacturing sector retrenches.

That's part of the idea behind \$15 million targeted for tourism in the new Jobs Fund. The tentative plan is to use it over two years to spread advertising beyond the current targets -- chiefly Chicago and other cities close to the border -- to reach deeper into Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin.

But even this push will equal only about a third of what Illinois spends and barely tops the tourism budget in Wisconsin, which just upped its ante and



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will send more ads Michigan's way. The Wisconsin comparison is particularly embarrassing because Wisconsin's travel industry is half to two-thirds the size of Michigan's, based on state comparisons in a recent report done for the National Chamber Foundation.

### **The industry's job**

But there are deeper problems than just spreading the word. At Michigan State University, the Tourism Resource Center is shepherding an industrywide effort to study shortcomings and develop a coordinated strategy -- an idea that has been raised fruitlessly since the late 1940s.

The new push reflects serious concerns that Michigan's product, as well as its miserly promotion, has gotten in the way of success. All the advertising in the world won't work if the state doesn't have the goods to back it up.

"If we bring people in and they're not happy, that's worse," said Donald Holecek, director of MSU's Travel Resource Center.

This self-examination and strategy development is intended to be entirely a grassroots effort generated among those already involved in tourism. Much emphasis will be put on identifying shared needs where businesses can work together, whether it's within specific categories, such as hotels-motels, or through regional efforts.

Other avenues for growth include better packaging, more tours and land cruises. The popularity of cruises reflects a growing interest among travelers of having a fixed-price vacation, saving them time and often money, compared with booking their own trips. Michigan has little to offer travelers who like that option.

But tourism businesses in Michigan also need to take a hard look at themselves.

"A lot of our product is dated," Holecek said. "People don't like to hear that."

### **The state's role**

Every dollar spent in travel promotion results in \$3 in new taxes for the state, according to research Holecek cites, so it makes huge sense, as a quick economic stimulus, for the state to throw more money into out-of-state advertising.

But once the industry gets its act together, lawmakers and Gov. Jennifer Granholm ought to figure out how to support an industry upgrade, including some seed money for tourism development projects akin to the venture-fund investing planned for high-tech companies.

Tourism jobs consist of much more than burger-flipping. Plus, this type of service-sector work can't be outsourced and seldom gets downsized because of new technology. On the contrary, improved information technology should stimulate partnerships and better communications that create more activity and yet more jobs. The state's stake in keeping residents employed argues firmly for getting involved.

Finally, the state needs to get its own residents on board. Travel Michigan has award-winning ads, but residents only see billboards with "Michigan.org" on them. That may be practical -- the billboards apparently prompt high Web site traffic -- but it doesn't give residents a clue about what the state brand is.

Residents are the frontline hosts, and they need to know what is, in effect, the company slogan. Besides, everyone here could use the lift from being reminded Michigan is a desirable place to be and that its desirability is being

promoted.

Michigan may never have a singular attraction like Disney World, but no other state has 3,288 miles of freshwater landscape surrounding a wealth of diverse activities. It's time to buff up the state and promote it shore to shore.

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