

City Talk for July 26, 2023
City Manager's Office
Karen Osburn, city manager

Updates on the city's new Tourism Program

In the last few months, the city of Sedona has been busy setting up an in-house tourism program that seeks to:

- strike a healthy balance between promoting our terrific local businesses and attractions and preserving our residents' quality of life;
- educate visitors about our unique destination;
- and attract those who will be both good stewards and will come during times when we have the capacity to accommodate them.

This effort so far has included organizing an internal team; creating a tourism webpage; establishing relationships and engaging in partnership opportunities with the Arizona Office of Tourism (AOT); developing a business database; soliciting residents, businesses and other stakeholders to apply for our Tourism Advisory Board and much, much more.

If you haven't followed the journey of how this new initiative came about, city council asked that the city develop its own in-house tourism program after the Sedona Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau did not renew its contract for tourism management and marketing services with the city. This led the city to also designate itself as the official Destination Management and Marketing Organization (DMMO) for Sedona.

One of our first tasks is setting up a database of tourism-related businesses, inside city limits, which we will use to keep all of our local business partners informed, display business listings on our website, include products and services in upcoming promotions and campaigns, and work with the Arizona Office of Tourism and other industry representatives to distribute media, travel agent, group meeting and other leads to local businesses by matching these opportunities with our businesses' unique offerings. We invite all in-city businesses to register with the Tourism Program. It is free, does not require any special membership and has no obligations. It just takes a few minutes to fill out a form, which you can find at www.sedonaaz.gov/tourism.

While destination marketing was paused during 2021 and 2022 due to over-tourism and the associated impacts, we are seeing the economy soften somewhat, and as such, additional strategies for targeted, strategic destination branding and marketing, and responsible destination management will be explored. Any strategies and tactics implemented will be data driven, have measurable outcomes and be focused on sustainable, smart and well-managed visitation.

The new Tourism Advisory Board should be up and running by fall. They will advise city council and staff on programs, projects and initiatives related to tourism, starting with a strategic planning exercise. This 11-member board will be intentionally diverse, representing a broad range of perspectives. How much is too much? What kind of visitor do we want? What's our brand? All of these topics will be revisited by the Tourism Advisory Board, recognizing that approaches that may have worked historically should not be assumed to be the right ones for the future. This body will also have regular, agenda public meetings and invite and encourage all interested parties to be a part of ongoing community conversations about tourism and future tourism-related decisions. These conversations will continue with the city council as the Board makes recommendations, the community weighs in and final decisions about how best to manage our destination are made collectively.

Another project the city is working on in relation to tourism is to obtain accurate data to inform future marketing and management decisions. For many years, we have been throwing around figures regarding how many people visit Sedona. Is it 2 million? 3 million? 3.5 million? In 2021 when we saw a visitation boom, what was that number? Historically, we've used a rough estimate based on hotel occupancy data but with the rise of the short-term rental market, and newer data platforms with additional data sources

available, our estimates and decision-making tools need refinement. Understanding the current visitation levels, demographics of visitors, origin and destination of visitors, local spending and other economic indicators, etc., will help us going forward to determine how best to help our businesses thrive while managing the impacts of visitation on the rest of our community.

It truly is a new era for Sedona tourism, and we look forward to creating our future together, with residents and businesses partnering to ensure a healthy economy while preserving and enhancing what makes Sedona so special to us all.