

Bleak numbers force tourism officials to rethink message

By Kathryn Reed

A \$300 million decline in gaming revenue at Stateline from 1990 to 2009; the number of employees on the South Shore from 1990 to 2008 going from 13,000 to 7,000; hotel occupancy on both sides of the state line dropping from 57 percent to 43 percent between 2006 and 2009 – these are just some of the facts and figures officials on the South Shore must contend with when looking at the local economy and what to do to turn the rising tide of bad news.

The PowerPoint presentation was prepared by the Tahoe Douglas Visitors Authority with the help of Ward Bullard who works for Harveys-Harrah's casinos at the lake. It was first shown to the Douglas County Commission, with the South Lake Tahoe City Council shown the slides this month.



Tourism officials plan to promote the outdoors of Lake Tahoe, with less emphasis on gaming.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, gave the presentation to the council along with her annual report.

With many of the Stateline casino workers living in South Lake Tahoe, what the casinos are doing directly impacts employment levels of city residents and social agencies they may lean on for help.

“In case you think we’re unique here, the same thing is going on at tribal casinos,” Chaplin told the council.

She talked about layoffs at the Indian casinos just west of Lake Tahoe, how their market is shrinking, that they are fighting each other for the same customer, and how their buses to import customers are not working well.

Chaplin said the area that may prove to be a greater threat to the South Shore in the near term is Las Vegas.

“From the Bay Area you can hop on a plane and get a room for less than \$100 a night. You didn’t have that a couple years ago,” Chaplin said.

Still, it wasn’t all doom and gloom from the region’s tourism leader.

In Chaplin’s report about how the LTVA did in the last fiscal year, she pointed to the 16 percent increase in attendance at July’s annual celebrity golf tournament, 11 percent increase in traffic to the visitors centers, securing a Nevada Commission on Tourism grant, public relations having a 40-to-1 return on investment, and ending the year with 1,000 bucks in the bank.

As the summer advertising rolls out, it will have more to do with promoting the passion of locals, the events that attract young at heart adults and families of all ages, and the South Shore more holistically than it has been done in the past.

Chaplin pointed to the number of amenities Lake Tahoe has that other destinations can never have – the lake itself as one, and the varied experiences available in a relatively small area.

“We recognize our iconic location,” Chaplin said. “We need to capitalize to let people know how much we love this place and that they can too. Gaming is still important, but it’s going through a metamorphosis. We need to broaden our appeal beyond skiing and gaming.”