

Tourism agencies keep eye on gas pumps' impact on travel

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

As if Joe Kelley needed another challenge.



The interim CEO of the Reno-Sparks Convention & Visitors Authority already has made additional staff and budget cuts since he took over at the recession-weary agency in February.

Now soaring gasoline prices are muscling for his attention to the Reno-Tahoe region's crucial summer tourism season.

"We're very concerned, but certain things are beyond our control," Kelley said of gas prices that have blown past the \$4-a-gallon mark. "It's just another battle to fight."

The last time prices were this high was May-June 2008. Then, some resorts, including John Ascuaga's Nugget, countered with gas cards and other promotions to lure Californians, the region's key drive-up market, who might have hesitated to cross the Sierra.

So far this year, the industry is holding back – but watching nevertheless as recession continues to thin travelers' wallets.

"We recognize gas prices could affect summer travel. We're looking to see what we can do to overcome that," said Nugget spokeswoman Missy Hinton.

At Lake Tahoe, "We're not necessarily entertaining doing anything," said Carol Chaplin, executive director of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

“The last time this happened, we might have fared all right based on our destination value. There are a lot of things to do,” she said. “And our (proximity) makes us look attractive to, say, a trip to Hawaii. The last thing we give up as Americans is driving our cars.”

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