

Congressional impact on Nevada tourism laid out

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – Roadwork on Nevada highways in the Lake Tahoe Basin began before the normal May 1 start date because the weather has cooperated and Congress is likely to pass a transportation bill that will keep funding in place through Sept. 30.

The current funding expires June 30, though the House on Wednesday passed a bill to extend the program for another three months.

Ryan McGinness, principal of District Strategies, gave a rundown April 19 about how what is happening in Washington directly impacts the Silver State. McGinness led one of the workshops at the Hyatt in Incline during the annual three-day Nevada Commission on Tourism Rural Roundup conference. (It ends today.)



Roadwork, like this on Highway 28 on April 19, is tied to federal funding. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While the emphasis of the gathering is to bring the six sectors of rural Nevada together to talk about tourism, McGinness pointed out how what goes on 3,000 miles from Lake Tahoe has a direct impact on tourism throughout Nevada.

“Transportation is key for tourism. It gets them to our destinations and it gets them around our destinations,” McGinness told the group.

With a limited season to work on roads, Tahoe can't have an interruption in funding and still get the work done in a timely manner. State highways also don't get fixed without those federal dollars.

Continued transportation dollars will be critical for the basin if the Tahoe-Reno area is awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics. (Attendees learned more about the Olympic plans on April 18.) If selected, the region will move to the top of the list for federal transportation dollars.

McGinness started the talk about the uncertainty of what will go on in the nation's capital this political season. He said there is speculation the minimum will get done until the election, after which it remains to be seen who is in the White House and Congress, and whether the remaining electeds will try to accomplish anything for the five weeks between the election and the winter holiday break.

Tax issues related to renewable energy production need to be addressed before the end of the year. What happens to the solar industry would impact Nevada more than wind.

The Secure Rural Schools legislation affects districts throughout Nevada. Funding is up for reauthorization.

When it comes to specific tourism issues and how Washington plays a role, McGinness touched on the \$823,000 bill the Government Services Administration racked up at a conference in Las Vegas.

“No one can say that was responsible spending, but we don’t want it to hurt Nevada or Las Vegas,” McGinness said. “We need to define it as a behavioral issue, not a Las Vegas issue.”

When the 2008 AIG scandal made the news it had a chilling effect on conventions in Southern Nevada. That was when the company spent about \$200,000 on employees to party in Vegas after receiving a federal bailout.

Conventions are big business for Vegas. They bring in about 5 million visitors a year, add \$6 billion to the area’s economy and support 58,000 jobs.

While Congress has hearings on the overspending in Vegas, it is also working on substantive ways to bring more foreign travelers to the entire country.

Bringing international travelers to the United States could get easier as Congress works on the visa waiver process. Currently, people in 36 countries don’t have to get a visa for the U.S. China, Brazil and India are the three countries being talked about being added to that list.

At an afternoon discussion where leaders of the seven tourism sectors spoke, all talked about how international travelers are growing in numbers.

Sue Barton, No. 2 at Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and the head of the Tahoe-Reno Territory for NCOT, said it’s the number of French travelers coming into the South Shore visitors centers who have most surprised her. She believes their sense of independence leads them to the centers because they have not wanted to pre-book all of their travel.

Teri Laursen with the Las Vegas Territory said 18 of 20 group bookings come from China. However, Canada, United Kingdom and Mexico account for the top three countries in terms of travelers arriving at McCarran International Airport.

While Nevada is experiencing a surge in international travelers, the country is losing market share, according to McGinness. He said in the last decade the number of international travelers coming to the U.S. dropped by 37 percent, while during those same 10 years the number of global travelers increased by 60 million.

This is also the post-9/11 era, so how the terrorist attacks and subsequent burdensome safety measures that were put in place impacted people's decisions to come to the U.S. is not known.

But McGinness pointed out until now the United States has never had a brand, never reached out to other countries to sell itself, while other countries do it all the time.

Ads will launch in the next few weeks. Visa application fees fund the program. Private companies like Marriott, Disney and Best Western have also committed substantial sums of money to the overall pot of cash.

Another bill floating in Congress would expedite the visa process for athletes coming to the U.S. to compete in the Olympics or World Cup.