

Reno takes its tourism message on the road

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

Reno's primary tourism agency has reached into the past to move into the future.

A refurbished 1951 Willys Jeep station wagon, loaded with outdoor gear and bearing promotional slogans, is the Reno-Sparks Convention & Visitors Authority's vehicle to get there.

The freshly painted "Washoe Willys" was introduced Wednesday by the agency as a logical way to promote the Reno-Tahoe region as a year-round tourism attraction.

"Cars are a great conversation starter," Chris Baum, CEO of the RSCVA, said at a news conference in downtown Reno.

"And a cool car is something a lot of people are interested in. This will draw people to the story we're trying to tell, that while we have gaming, we're a four-seasons region."

He said studies show that 55 percent of Northern Nevada tourists will gamble, "We have to get them here under other pretenses. We've got to change the conversation from gaming to outdoors."

The vehicle bears the RSCVA's logo on its doors and proclaims "4 seasons - 1,000 reasons" on the side and "Find your passion" on the back.

Rear windows sport stickers of businesses in the area's Special Events Coalition. Atop the rig sits a kayak, water and snow skis, fishing pole and golf clubs.

Inside, the original dashboard and three-speed stick remain, but the bench seats were rebuilt and re-upholstered.

“Anybody looking at this is bound to see something cool,” Baum said.

While the “Washoe Willys” is an early authentic sport-utility vehicle complete with four-wheel-drive and deep-tread tires, Baum said it’s been gussied up for city streets, too.

“It’s designed to go over boulders, but we made it a little more street-able,” he said. That includes chrome bumpers and a chrome front license plate frame reading “Reno, Nevada.”

Baum said he found the vehicle on the Internet as a partially restored Willys Jeep that already had a modern Buick V-6 engine installed. With the help of several local businesses, he said the “Washoe Willys” was born at a cost of “under \$30,000.”

And it won’t just sit inside its home, the Reno-Sparks Convention Center. The RSCVA staff will take the Willys to trade shows, as well as special events in the region, beginning with next week’s Reno-Tahoe Open and, in two weeks, Hot August Nights.

“We think this is the best way to represent the cool things we as a region have to offer,” Baum said.