

Group Reservations Can Be Indicator of Summer's Strength

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17 slips rented for the season to local boat owners and 63 slips for transient boaters. It takes reservations for 75 percent of the transient slips.

David Sanderson, general manager at Mission Point Resort, said comparing current reservations with other statistics, such as the reservations at other hotels and travel groups, are one of the indicators he uses to take an early gauge of a season's potential.

"We work principally with two different kinds of business," he said, "the individual traveler, which can be a couple or a family of four, and the group business. Group business is easier to predict because we can compare how we're doing this year with last year at the same time," he said. "So far, we're doing better."

Ms. Slevin agreed, explaining that in terms of group and wedding reservations, "Everyone is up this season, about five percent on the whole, compared to last season."

Group business is also an indicator used by Mackinac

State Historic Parks. Director Phil Porter said he looks at winter and spring attendance at other historic sites around the country, but reservations here are his most reliable indicator.

"I look at what our group numbers are doing," he said. "That's a number you can look at year to year because everything is pre-booked."

John Hulett, general manager of Grand Hotel, said the tourism industry is concerned with the general state of the economy, especially with the downsizing of large corporations. He predicts that tourists will "possibly stay closer to home," but that could comprise a large pool of potential visitors.

"There are hundreds of people who haven't been here in a long time, and we hope they come visit," he said.

Despite early pessimism, prospects for a successful season are becoming brighter, he said.

"The way it looks right now, we are much more optimistic as to what the end of the season will bring."

Mr. Sanderson also said that despite initial concerns about the individual tourist activity, he has

seen a great increase in interest on Mackinac from reservations made at Mission Point.

Ms. Slevin said a factor in many decisions about summer travel will most likely be the rising cost of gasoline.

"Unfortunately, the price of gas in America is just catching up with the rest of the world and gas is what one would consider a necessary cost," she said. "The problem the consumer will have is the additional cost...It is unlikely that a person would postpone a vacation...but it may be likely that a person spending an additional \$100 to \$200 per month may have to rethink their spending overall. This is what concerns us in the tourism industry."

These fuel concerns, however, can also help, said Mr. Sanderson. People may rethink driving to more distant destinations like Florida in favor of a regional trip to Mackinac Island.

Added Ms. Slevin: "We hope that Mackinac Island will be a good example of conscientious living. Because we do not rely on motor vehicles, we are in an interesting situation, and now Mackinac Island becomes a

clear example for community and environmentally correct living." She hopes that Mackinac Island's car-free and gas-free image will appeal to visitors who are trying to be economical.

"People do save money staying here," she continued, "as there are no fuel costs associated with their visit."

With mounting concern comes new marketing strategies.

Mr. Hulett emphasized that by advertising in numerous media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio, Grand Hotel is reminding Michiganders that Mackinac Island is still around.

"We're aggressively pursuing those avenues to reach out to people," he said, adding that Grand Hotel is also taking advantage of technology with strategies such as e-mail reminders.

In addition to more diverse advertising, hotel strategies and projections include expanding the audience to visitors who previously have not been very active, but possibly may play a bigger role.

"A market that would hold some potential is the Canadian market," Mr. Sanderson said. He explained that since the exchange rate is currently more favorable than it has been in the

past and the border is not too far away, Canadian visitors might provide an unexpected boost to the season.

Ms. Slevin said the Tourism Bureau is also aware of the benefits of appealing to possible visitors who live within driving distance.

"We are focusing our travel marketing in the Great Lakes States because trends show people are considering travel closer to home," she said.

"We are constantly looking at new ways of marketing our sites," said Mr. Porter. "Now, we're offering a greater menu of programs to help grow our audience."

Activities such as overnight programs at Colonial Michilimackinac have become popular among school groups, and Fort Mackinac will open a new exhibit, Military Medicine at Mackinac, in June.

Despite the growing concern about the season's activity, innovative strategies and plans may help boost what seems to be the possibility of a very good season.

"We don't think it'll be gangbusters," Mr. Hulett said, "but we still think it'll be a good season as far as the tourism industry goes."

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Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



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cent against Bouchard. She had a slightly smaller, but still substan-

tial, lead across the northern Lower Peninsula (36 polled).

With a 47-43 lead over DeVos, Granholm did slightly better in the Traverse City media market than she did in April, when she led by one percent. In April, DeVos led by one percent across the northern Lower Peninsula, and by 48-42 in the May poll. Granholm's latest numbers were 65-18 across the U.P., where she trailed DeVos 33-41 in April.

Again, sub samples have bigger margins of error. Both DeVos and Granholm downplay importance of statewide polls, and tiny leads, at this early stage.

But both camps say DeVos' spending on TV ads - about \$3 million so far - is having an impact. That is evident by the fact that numerous polls over two months have the race a toss-up, in contrast to large leads that Granholm held before the ad blitz.

The encouraging thing is that public awareness of the campaigns is increasing, and the candidates are venturing Up North beyond their downstate urban bases.

George Weeks recently retired after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.



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