

OCL 2006 Downtown Study Committee
Tourism Panel
June 8, 2006

Attendees: Sarah McIlvain, Mary Thompson, Steve Kearney, Clyde Ohl, Chris Capella-Peters, Dennis Connors, Tom Letham, Russ Andrews, Karen Kitney, Merika Treier, Dave Mankiewicz, Jessica Crawford, Marilyn Pinsky, Joe Ash, Doug Sutherland, Carol Boll, Sandra Barrett

Downtown Convention and Visitors Panel

Participants in the study session were Gerry Gallagher of the OnCenter and Doug Small of the Convention and Visitors Bureau. They spoke on the current status of tourism as it relates to downtown and their thoughts on factors that would attract more tourist business to Syracuse.

Gerry reported that the OnCenter hosts about 900 events yearly for about 1 million visitors. That includes conventions, symphony concerts, hockey games – any event in the OnCenter complex, which also includes the War Memorial and Crouse-Hinds Theater.

Doug noted that the CVB is working hard to make downtown “special” because cities can’t do well in the tourism/convention business unless they have a vibrant downtown. OnCenter bookings are good, but more events are local, which means less of an economic impact.

Both panelists pointed out the role convention visitors play in downtown economy. They come in, spend money, pay taxes and then leave. They also may return as private visitors on vacation. In order to sell the city as a convention site, you have to sell the individual on the city. Also, the same qualities that sell a city as a convention site will promote economic growth in other contexts – attracting companies to the city, for instance.

Syracuse’s greatest assets: friendliness of people and affordability of the city

Concerns relating to tourism:

- Quality shopping is #1 interest of convention-goers. Need strong, quality shopping areas.
- Also need a critical mass of convenient business attractions, including restaurants, shopping, etc.
- Need good signposts to areas of interest – connective walking corridor to Armory Square, e.g.
- Attractiveness – Some visitors have shared concerns about attractiveness of city, about the number of parking lots, e.g. Need to work on beautification.
- Need entry “points” into the city with good signage.

- Need for more trash receptacles. Every retail business should provide a trash receptacle outside his/her business. Receptacles could be attached to traffic lights or street lamps.
- Need for a hotel at the convention center (scheduled to open in 2009)
- Need to train front-line tourism workers (hotel clerks, taxi drivers, etc.) to “sell” the city to visitors.
- Suburban disconnect – Those from the suburbs often still don’t know where the Civic Center is located. Also a perception problem concerning downtown safety among suburban residents. Additional restaurants and businesses downtown would help keep local residents downtown “after the show.”

Some initiatives under way:

- Working with airport taxi drivers and bus drivers on promoting the city and its sights to passengers.
- Regional brand being developed in order to forge a clear identity for the city. “You’ve got to sell the state, then the region, and then Syracuse.”

Indianapolis was mentioned as a “hot” city currently in terms of tourism and convention business. Strong advocacy and support from both city and suburban communities was crucial to its revitalization and ability to create a tourism “niche.”

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