

BUSINESS

Tourism sector is pay-to-play

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INTO the first year of his tenure as president of the Manitoba Hotel Association, one of Scott Jocelyn's biggest projects is to reinforce the message that the more money the province spends on tourism promotion, the greater its return on investment will be.

Last weekend's Heritage Classic hockey festival was a case in point.

"Look at the weekend we just went through," he said. "How much would you have to pay to get the exposure the province and the city got from the Heritage Classic? You can't buy that kind of exposure."

It looks like he's not going to have too much trouble convincing the Pallister government of the wisdom of that kind of investing.

Even though Manitoba's new Progressive Conservative government is developing an image for cutting costs, one of the first spending initiatives it announced was a five-year increase in tourism spending, totalling \$28.5 million.

Cliff Cullen, the province's minister of growth, enterprise and trade, spoke at the hotel association's annual general meeting Monday and reiterated that spending increase and acknowledged his government's commitment to the province's \$1.6-billion tourism industry.

"We have a tremendous opportunity to grow the tourism industry here," he said.

There are close to 300 hotels in the province — Jocelyn has visited 135 of them so far — and the influx of activity such as the outdoor NHL game and alumni match at Investors Group Field created an intensity of activity around the city that obviously was much greater than the average pre-Halloween October weekend. The receipts aren't all in, but clearly the excitement in the city was a boon across the board — not just for the hotels.

"So many other industries will benefit as well," Jocelyn said. "The hotels are full. That means they can schedule more people to work and collect more taxes for the government."

It's not all about the return of the NHL to Winnipeg, but in the last five years there have been a number of new hotel properties built in the city, and there are more in the works.

Generally speaking, the NHL, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and additional events mean that there are more reasons for organizations to put Winnipeg back on the schedule as a place to hold meetings and conventions.

Last week, the board of directors of Export Development Canada held a quarterly meeting in Winnipeg for the first time in a long time, booking ballrooms and occupying additional hotel rooms.

"The province had not been spending lots on tourism, but they are spending more now. We know it will attract even more activity," said Jocelyn. "We're excited about it."

He also understands that if there's going to be more tourism promotion here, the hotel properties will need to up their game, as well.

At the hotel association's annual general meeting, there was a session targeted at rural hotels about how to boost sales in their bars with easy and appealing food offerings. It was a direct effort to get some properties that had let their food offerings lapse to improve them. There was also a comprehensive presentation about digital marketing. George Leith, vice-president of sales at the Saskatoon firm VendAsta, is an expert at bringing out a company's best online presence. Among other things, he said that hotels need to go out of their way to encourage online reviews of their establishments, which will lead to better search-engine positioning. But that also means hotels have to respond to comments and reviews — the good and the bad.

It was a sobering message to many in attendance, but in light of the new era of renewed belief and investment in the tourism industry here, one that has some real promise for greater returns.

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Read more by Martin Cash.