

Regional tourism efforts yield the most bang for R.I. bucks

A recent editorial in the Providence Business News (“Tourism fiefdoms are relics to relinquish,”

GUEST
COLUMN

Martha Sheridan

May 14, 2012) called for the consolidation of Rhode Island’s tourism efforts into one statewide agency. While the editorial’s hypothesis claims consolidation would save Rhode Island money, such a strategy would in fact cost the state potential tax revenue.

Faced with a harsh economic landscape, Rhode Island must look for ways to streamline practices and introduce new efficiencies. However, tourism is simply the wrong place to look. We are a powerful economic engine for Rhode Island.

Consider a 2011 report from Global Insights that stated that \$374 million in tax revenue was generated by the travel and tourism sector in Rhode Island in 2010. And, as the region and the nation have only inched their way out of the economic doldrums, the tourism sector in Rhode Island has recently seen robust growth. Based on a key indicator, hotel-tax collections, we have realized significant gains in revenue generated at

hotels over the past 18 months. This hasn’t happened by accident, it is, in large part, due to targeted and strategic programs implemented by the state’s regional tourism organizations.

The regional tourism model that Rhode Island adheres to, in which there is one, umbrella-like state tourism office and different regional agencies throughout the area, is considered a “best practice” in our industry and has been adopted by virtually every state, particularly those with meeting and convention offerings. Ideally, tourism branding is coordinated at the state level but tourism promotion and product development is done at the local level.

Because Rhode Island’s state tourism budget is among the lowest in the United States, the tourism regions work collaboratively to support statewide initiatives even more strongly, as we attempt to fill the void left by an underfunded state tourism effort. This includes: participating at trade shows; hosting in-state events and familiarization tours for tour operators and media; presenting out-of-state educational events in key markets such as New York, Boston and Chicago; and collaborating

on tourism research projects.

In addition to working together with the state tourism office, we are all experts in our own geographic area and highlight different aspects of our communities to our own respective key feeder markets.

As destination-marketing experts, our core mission is to connect the visitors to local businesses. We need “boots on the ground,” interacting daily with hotels, restaurants, arts organizations, media, attractions, transportation companies and all of those businesses and individuals integral to the growth of tourism in Rhode Island.

Providence Restaurant Weeks began seven years ago as a marketing initiative designed to promote local restaurants. Today, the program runs twice a year and encompasses nearly 100 restaurants from across the state.

Newport has developed a comprehensive and successful

marketing effort to brand itself as a premier “destination-wedding” location.

The Blackstone Valley has created original programs such as the Polar Express and the popular Riverboat Explorer tours.

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South County has developed a campaign that highlights its rich history and seaside beauty.

Warwick successfully markets itself as “the Crossroads of Southern New England,” a transportation hub.

And Block Island has partnered with a local

artist on an innovative promotion aimed at steering visitors to the island’s extraordinary natural resources.

These are just a few examples of the geographically specific programming being done at the regional level, programs that not only benefit visitors but also greatly enhance the quality of life that Rhode Island residents enjoy.

Additionally, both Provi-

dence/Warwick and Newport have strong meeting and convention sales and marketing programs, which are not typically handled at the statewide level. Attracting this lucrative business to the state in an extremely competitive national landscape requires an in-depth knowledge of both the meetings industry and how local product offerings match the requirements of individual planners.

While consolidation of tourism agencies may seem like a logical cost-cutting measure, it will weaken a successful, productive system and decimate product development and programming that has been built over years of hard work. It will hurt the state’s businesses and – ultimately – the Rhode Island taxpayer.

In order to achieve maximum success we need to ensure adequate funding for a statewide branding effort while maintaining the successful regional tourism system that currently exists. ■

Martha Sheridan is the president and CEO of the Providence Warwick Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Generating economic statistics is an important public task

In various parts of the world, politicians are waging war on the economic statistics that help people assess the performance of their leaders.

GUEST
COLUMN

Emi Nakamura,
Jon Steinsson and
Nicolas Vincent

Over the past few years, the Argentine government has reported inflation rates more than 12 percentage points below private-sector estimates, and has filed criminal charges against statisticians attempting to publish their own data.

Late last year, Greece launched a criminal investigation of the head of its statistical agency for reporting larger budget deficits than the government deemed appropriate (or, as he put it, for “not cooking the books”).

If you think such degradation of national statistics couldn’t happen in more developed countries, think again.

In the U.S., a battle is brewing in Congress over two of the most valuable gauges of the nation’s economic health: the American Community Survey and the Economic Census. The data sets, which the U.S. has maintained in some form since the early 1900s, provide researchers and the public with a trove of information on everything from the size of families’ mortgage payments in Boise, Idaho, to the nation’s median annual income.

The data play a crucial role in calculating the performance of the entire U.S. economy, and in deciding how public funds should be allocated. Economists use them to figure out whether government policies are working. Businesses use them to study demographic trends and inform important decisions. The clarity they provide helps make the U.S. particularly attractive for foreign investment.

In early May, legislators in the U.S.

House passed a bill that would eliminate both surveys, on the grounds that they are too intrusive – even though no information identifying the participants is ever released to the public. Robert Groves, the director of the U.S. Census Bureau, says ending the surveys will “devastate the nation’s statistical information.”

In reality, the cost of data collection is minimal. The statistical agencies that collect most economic data – the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Bureau of Labor Statistics – account for less than 0.05 percent of President Barack Obama’s \$3.7 trillion proposed budget.

Why, then, are politicians attacking statistics? Perhaps they have become so accustomed to good data that they fail to recognize what life and governance would be like without them.

It’s hard to overstate how dangerous the destruction of high-quality, objective statistical information would be. Policy-making would become more subjective, and hence more ideological. Governments would have more leeway to lie to the people about the success of their policies and the state of the economy.

If the bill to eliminate the U.S. surveys makes it to President Obama’s desk, he should use his veto power. ■

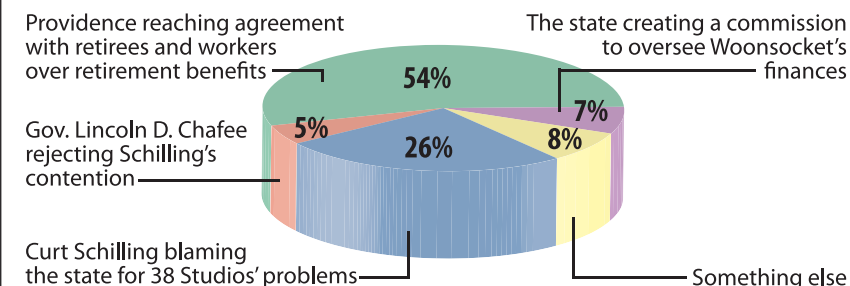
Emi Nakamura is the David W. Zalaznick associate professor of business at Columbia University, and a member of the technical advisory committee of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Jon Steinsson is an associate professor of economics at Columbia University. Nicolas Vincent is an assistant professor of economics, HEC Montreal.

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June 3-9

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This week’s PBN.com Poll

Are you planning on attending any of the America’s Cup World Series events in Newport at the end of June?

- Yes
- No
- I’m not sure

To vote in this week’s poll, go to PBN.com and follow the link on the home page.

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