

## Tourism brings in billions to Mid-Valley

RON COWAN Statesman Journal

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Jim Bernau was savoring one of the pleasures of being in the Mid-Willamette Valley last week from a vintner's perspective. "We're seeing some of the best sugars and flavors that I've seen in 25 years of this," said Bernau, the president and founder of Turner's Willamette Valley Vineyards. The state of our grapes is not just a vintner's concern, it's part of what is becoming a big business in Marion and Polk counties: tourism.

The economic effect of tourism here was \$512 million in 2007, and it's a figure that's growing by \$30 million per year. Direct job creation was 6,010 jobs.

Statewide, direct travel spending was \$8.3 billion in 2007, up from \$7.9 billion in 2006. The direct and secondary effect was \$3.3 billion in 2007, with the creation of 132,200 jobs.

And the Marion-Polk county area has the state's three biggest tourist attractions: the Woodburn Company Stores, Spirit Mountain Casino at Grand Ronde and Silver Falls State Park, Oregon's largest state park.

The stores alone draw an estimated 4.4 million people to Oregon each year.

With the move of Travel Salem, formerly Salem Convention & Visitors Association, to a new Travel Cafe visitors center in the Grand Building downtown, the issue of tourism and its economic effect has come into sharper focus.

The center, opening about Dec. 13, will be a one-stop introduction to the pleasures and opportunities of this area, with everything from wine tasting to plasma screen TVs, iPod downloads, Wi-Fi access and ticket sales.

Wineries are a big part of why people come here, with our reputation for excellence in pinot noir.

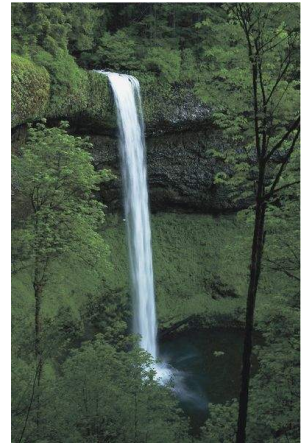
"In the last five years, the number of wineries in Oregon has doubled," Bernau said.

We now have 350 statewide, with 51 in Marion and Polk counties alone.

"Wineries are really part of culinary tourism," he said. "Wines are food."

Even in a recession, tourism tends to be resilient, said Angie Morris, the executive director of Travel Salem.

"Travel of some kind, whether it's locally focused or not, is always going to



Silver Falls State Park

### Salem/Marion County travel profile

Visitor Origin: Four in 10 visitors from Oregon; most others from Washington and California

Purpose of Visit: Visits with friends and relatives, pleasure trips

Season of visit: Friends and relatives off-season; festivals/events in the summer

Trip Purpose by visitor origin: Oregon visitors for business, out-of-state for friends and relatives

Leading attractions: State and local parks, Capitol building, wineries and museums

Leading activities: Urban activities

Leading location: Salem

be fairly resilient," she said.

Even as the visitor count was down last year, it still was higher than anywhere in the state.

Morris thinks that getting the visitors to Salem is just the starting point, and the Travel Cafe can build on that contact.

"The visitor center for me is when the tire hits the road," she said. "It's about lengthening the stay."

The longer they stay — days or even a lifetime — those dollars float the economy.

The Travel Cafe, with assets such as a data-driven Web site, virtual tours, job information and blogging, can allow visitors to connect with the community in different ways, be it for a visit or a job.

"We can help create that connection for them," Morris said. "Tourism does connect into all corners of the economy."

Travel Salem is working on recruiting a convention that would bring 10,000 people to Salem in 2010.

Travel Salem brought in 44 conventions in 2007-08, with an economic effect of \$4.25 million.

The Salem Conference Center, which had revenues of \$3.3 million in 2007-08, put Salem on the map, Morris said.

Center manager Chrissie Bertsch said this fiscal year (the fourth) is on track to match that.

"We're not at capacity yet, but for our third year, we're right on pace," she said.

Other entities are betting on tourism, too.

Spirit Mountain Casino, which draws about 4 million visitors per year, completed a \$40 million expansion with a new concert hall/convention center this year, and the new \$10 million Oregon Garden Resort, with a restaurant, spa and 103-room hotel, opened in Silverton as a destination resort.

The Salem area has other attractions, from birding and bicycling to the A.C. Gilbert's Discovery Village, Salem's Riverfront Carousel, Mission Mill Museum, the Capitol building and Enchanted Forest amusement park.

Susan Tofte, the manager of Enchanted Forest, said the sagging economy has cut into its business, but it still draws more than 100,000 visitors per year.

"We kind of do our own thing," she said. "It certainly can't hurt us."

The Salem area also is a crossroads for those visiting the mountains, the

Frequency of travel and length of stay: Repeat visitation common

Overnight stays: 56 percent stayed overnight

Accommodations: 58 percent stayed in hotels, motels or B&B

Transportation: 67 percent of visitors traveled by auto

Type of travel party: 55 percent are one or two adults without children

Age of visitor: Adult visitors average 53 years old

Education level: 88 percent have college degrees

Traveler household income: More than half earn more than \$50,000 per year

Likelihood of recommendation: 72 percent very likely to recommend Salem and Marion County as travel destination

SOURCE: Dean Runyan Associates

Mission Mill Museum: 113,000 annually (rentals, events and tours)

beach, Central Oregon and area attractions such as historic covered bridges.

"I think there's a little bit more Oregon here than anywhere else," Morris said.

Salem does need more of some things, such as restaurants and motel rooms and activities for young people, Morris said.

Debbie McCune, Travel Salem director of sales, said Salem has about 1,700 rooms for overnight visitors, plus the 86 rooms at the Keizer Renaissance Inn.

Two-bedroom rooms are particularly in need.

"There are times we could probably fill them," McCune said. "Overall, they're doing well."

Morris said tourism growth here can be the tide that floats many boats.

"Tourism is really a vital component to economic development," she said.

"I think it's time for tourism to move to the forefront and really reinvent ourselves."

rcowan@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6728

A.C. Gilbert's  
Discovery Village: 80,000

Hallie Ford Museum of Art,  
Willamette University:  
30,000

Oregon Symphony  
Association in Salem  
concerts: 9,000

Enchanted Forest: 104,000

Salem's Riverfront  
Carousel: 148,000

Budget: \$613,770 (\$1.76  
million with in-kind  
products/services)

Economic effect of Tourism  
in 2007: \$512 million in  
Marion and Polk counties

Tourism job creation 2007:  
6,010

Annual economic effect  
increase last five years: \$30  
million

Visitor Guides distributed:  
150,000 annually

Advertising inquiries: 38,585

travelSalem.com hits: 6.4  
million

Visitors assisted personally:  
97,059