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Number of S.M. Tourists Up, Spending Down

By Jonathan Friedman
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May 10, 2010 --More people visited Santa Monica in 2009 than did in 2006. But the tourists put fewer dollars into the local economy, and in turn generated less tax money for the City government.

Those were the findings of Lauren Schlau Consulting (LSC) in its 2009 Santa Monica Tourism Economic Impact Study. The firm has done this study every three years since 1983, and beginning this year will do the study annually. The results of the 2009 report were released on Friday at the Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel for the first annual Santa Monica Travel & Tourism Summit, which was hosted by the Santa Monica Convention & Visitors Bureau (SMCVB).

This city welcomed 6.2 million visitors in 2009, a 13.5 percent increase from 2006. But the amount of money spent was down a little under 6 percent to \$1.1 billion. This translated to a decrease in tax money from \$39 million to \$34 million. Lauren Schlau, principal at LSC, said that drop can be attributed to the rise in the number of people spending their Santa Monica vacations nights at homes of friends and family rather than hotels and other commercial lodgings.

"When you take the hotel/lodging cost out of the equation, the cost of the trip went down dramatically on an overall basis," Schlau said.

The number of day visitors, who are

were lodging, meals, beverages and shopping. This comprised more than 80 percent of the total money spent in Santa Monica.

Putting a positive and humorous twist on some of the troubling news from 2009, Schlau said, "Santa Monica did fare much better, let's say escape less horribly, than many of the destinations we've looked at." She added, "The good news is when we do this (study) again ... we're going to look really, really good."

Tourism was down nationally and in California this past year. Visitor spending in California was down 10 percent.

"We had a tough year last year," Caroline Beteta, president and CEO of the California Travel & Tourism Commission, said at the summit.

Beteta said California will spend 2010 "getting out of the hole," and then can become a little more optimistic for a successful 2011.

Alison Best, vice president of sales and services for the SMCVB, mentioned some positive tourism happenings for Santa Monica that have occurred this year. Among them are the Los Angeles Marathon, the hosting of the pep rallies for both schools playing in the Rose Bowl and that PGA staff stayed in Santa Monica hotels during the Northern Trust Open golf tournament.

"We've really demonstrated how even if an event is not taking place in Santa Monica, regionally we want to be the place where they all want to be," she said.

Best said the SMCVB is focusing on sports marketing, among other areas, this year.

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Lauren Schlau

people visiting the county but lodging in a city other than Santa Monica, was up. But they spent 50 percent less money they did in 2006.

“They came here,” Schlau said. “They walked around. They did a lot of the less expensive leisure-time activities, and didn’t spend as much money. And that impacted overall spending.”

The number of international visitors was up 12 percent to 3 million people, with the highest amount coming from the United Kingdom, followed by Germany and Australia. International spending was \$602 million. The 3.3 million U.S. visitors (a 15 percent increase) spent \$553 million. Most of the domestic visitors were from California. The other most represented states were New York and Arizona.

Also among the findings was that the average length of stay for all visitors increased by 6.2 percent. The top visitor-spending categories

sports associations ... I want them to say, ‘You know what, we’re going to L.A. for this event, let’s have the sales meeting beforehand in Santa Monica,’” Best said.

Also at the summit, the SMCVB announced it is participating in the state-wide California Travel & Tourism Commission’s “SpendTom!” program, which aims to track two-dollar bills from their city of origin throughout the world as they are spent. The program is being conducted as part of National Tourism Week, which began on Saturday. More than \$4,000 worth of two-dollar bills are being distributed as change by local businesses. Those who receive them can go to www.spendtom.com to register the bills.

The SMCVB also launched the “Santa Monica Snapshots Photo Contest,” which encourages people from around the world to submit original photographs of their favorite Santa Monica locations. The winner will receive a two-night stay at the Holiday Inn Santa Monica Beach hotel. For more information on the contest, go to www.facebook.com/visitsantamonica.

